

STARLING STORIES



CALIUS

CAPTAIN

DANGER

BY TOM KILBRETT

STARLING

AND THE STAR WARS

Fascinating First Species

BY TOM KILBRETT, PLAYTESTER

STARTLING STORIES



Featuring...

CAPTAIN DANGER & THE SPACE RANGERS

and other stories!

STARTLING STORIES

Issue # 1

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Captain Danger & The Space Rangers created by Tom Johnson. All characters are fictitious, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is strictly coincidental.

Omega Station created by K.G. McAbee. All characters are fictitious, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is strictly coincidental.

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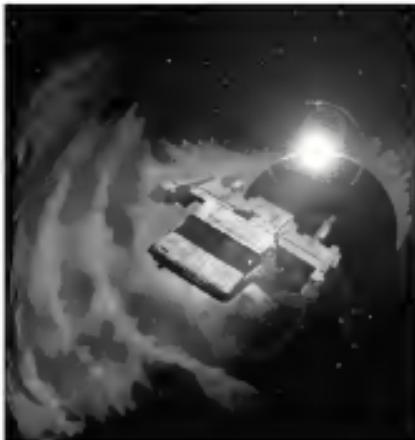


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This issue is dedicated to

Chuck Juzeck

...who created the definitive

Captain Future Handbook...

and who still dreams of Outer Space...

INTRODUCTION by Ron Hanna

Greetings, fellow fans of the fantastic! It is my great pleasure to bring to you a brand-new re-launch of an old, and classic, pulp fiction magazine from the 20th Century...

STARTLING STORIES

This all-new rendition of the previous pulp title hopes to bring to you the same feelings you had when you were a kid. Reading and sucking up Science-Fiction of all kinds, especially that good old Space Opera which included Captain Future, The Lensmen, and more.

We hope to bring you something unique: A series of "shared worlds", where several writers have created their own visions of a page-turning Sci-Fi series. And each one is open to other writers who may be interested in making their own mark on a series. Thanks go out to Tom Johnson (*Captain Danger & the Space Rangers*)... K.G. McAbee (*Omega Station*)... and Wayne Skiver (*The Space-Hawk Squadron*)...

All of these universes are looking for various viewpoints from any serious writer. I'll be sharing the "Guidelines", "Canon", or "Outline", whatever you choose to call it, to anyone who wants to help create worlds of wonder...

In fact, here's the Official Guide, based on Tom Johnson's concept, to characters and places that will play an important part of our featured *Startling Stories* hero:

CAPTAIN DANGER & THE SPACE RANGERS

BASE: The Crescent Moon, hidden somewhere within an asteroid field.

COMMANDER: Scott Perry, ship designation (#) unknown.

SHIPS: Silver Raptors

PERSONNEL: Captain Steve Danger & co-pilot, Lieutenant Cathy Rogers, a fully functioning robot; their ship designation is #1...

Most of Captain Danger's universe is filled with the race of man, but they have encountered a few alien races, many of which now belong to the Allied Command, some joining the Space Rangers.

Ranks within the Space Rangers:
Simple. Pilots hold the rank of Captain, copilots hold the rank of Lieutenant, though sometimes they might be a Captain. Enlisted ranks are Privates for workers, and Sergeants for non-commissioned officers and head of departments. There may be a Corporal that is trying for a promotion to sergeant, though. Only commissioned officers are given ships.

Jaspas – a race evolved from cats, from the Jaspel star system.

Taegu-ma – a race evolved from insects.

Zimco Robots – Androids, not many left since their world was destroyed.

Trangonadans – a race of humanoids, not quite human, but can almost pass for them.

Jareems – another humanoid race, also not quite human.

Giacodon – a race evolved from lizards, with long tails and three eyes.

Torabon – a race of 3-foot tall creatures with blue fur from Torabonaborgugl star system, usually work at manual labor.

Pridonians - 5-foot tall, purple-skinned humanoids, most work as space sailors because they are at home in zero gravity.

Fadashka - an asexual race, neither male or female, with pale yellow skin containing a metallic sheen.

Deben 4 Robots - a renegade race of robots, once built by man, now built by robots, not yet in the Empire, but wish to join.

There are many unknown races still to be discovered. Most of the pirates that prey upon the weak are humans, though sometimes a rogue alien will appear. As with the races, there are many unexplored worlds and galaxies out there; some with binary star systems, some with giant stars, dwarf stars, red suns, orange suns, etc.

Shall we go discovering?



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CALLING CAPTAIN DANGER

BY TOM JOHNSON

CHAPTER ONE

The Air Show

As the New World dignitaries gathered in the stands, the two suns of the Jaspel System shined brightly on the third planet in the solar system. The blue-green sky was alien to most of the off-worlders, being the home to the Jaspas, a human-like species that evolved from a cat race millennium ago. Seated at the head of the viewing stand was the Ambassador of the Galactic Empire Alliance, Franklin Membrane, recently assigned to the Jaspel worlds; and next to him was Commander Scott Perry from the Space Rangers, and his head scientist, Kela Kleeli, an Taegu-ma, whose insect-like appendages made one think of a praying mantis ready to strike. Seated next to Kela Kleeli was a sleek, orange-furred, female of the Jaspa race, Carbi Panta, who constantly groomed her long, pointed ears and thick whiskers as she sat diligently throughout the morning celebration. Carbi Panta had been assigned to the human dignitaries because she was female; truth was, the male Jaspas had a strong dislike for humans and most other races.

Alien music blared from the speakers, rising to a high crescendo as the mad melee of spacecraft from the Imperial Federation crossed and crisscrossed again and again in the otherwise calm sky above the half million people of a dozen races who watched spellbound. The slashing of the multicolored search beams lent vivacity and color to the mock space battle going on in the skies above the gathered dignitaries on the vast parade ground below. The ships circled

one another, darting in and out with the speed of a blinking eye, often stopping dead in their gravity-controlled, faster-than-the-speed-of-light spacecraft, and then turn suddenly to make a mock attack or defense against one of their opponents, and then dart away to engage another.

The exotic music seemed to anticipate the moves of the spaceships, rising to a peak just as the pattern-less dogfights changed and reshaped their maneuvers. A full fifteen hundred cruisers finally ceased their mock war, and lined up in strict formation, falling into a pattern of beautiful precision, forming a complex, interlocking space lattice that moved as a single entity, yet flowing from one crystallized shape to other forms as the maneuvering vehicles demanded. The magnificent spectacle ended as the ships flowed into a single, seemingly interminable line that rose high in the sky and so far away that they disappeared from sight – and then they came roaring back on a trajectory curve that brought each ship only a few yards from the ground as it crossed the parade plaza before the great reviewing stand. Each ship passed precisely through the course of the ship before it at a velocity usually reserved for the infinity of space. The thin, shrill scream of tortured air dinmed at the ears of the crowd and thrilled them with the sheer audacity of the stunt. For an ultra-microscopic error in the piloting of these ships of space could drive one of them into the hard ground. This would probably kill half of the onlookers by showering them with deadly debris, slashing shards of metal splinters, and the awesome air-wave that came from the explosion of the power-banks that drove the ships would be horrendous.

At the far end of the parade plaza, the ships lifted into the sky again and disappeared. There was no return this time. Each flight of twenty-five ships raced into the

blue, and then into the black of outer space, and headed for their home planets after it crossed the plaza on that last salute to the newly assigned Ambassador of the Galactic Empire Alliance.

Then came the finale, as a special team of the Silver Raptor class spacecraft shot across the viewing field at a speed almost making them invisible, except for the black blur. Then the ships slowed on their return, crossing in front of the viewing stands like thoroughbred stallions prancing to special music on a parade field.

Kela Kleeli began clicking excitedly in her native tongue, and Ambassador Membrane asked quickly:

"What is she so excited about?"

"That's my Rangers you see up there, Mr. Ambassador," Commander Perry acknowledged. "The lead spacecraft is #1, piloted by Captain Steve Danger, the young earthman she helped raise!"

As they spoke, the ships went into their military maneuvers. Fast, deadly, accurate, as they darted and spun, and fired their blasters at imaginary targets on an empty field. Two ships in particular kept close to Danger's SR#1, and these were space cruisers #2 commanded by Captain Johnny DelToro, and #3, commanded by Captain Van Goth.

"Why, those fools are trying to kill Captain Danger!" Ambassador Membrane ejaculated.

Laughing, Commander Perry said, "No, Sir, they are just in competition with him. Deadly competition, though it may be."

As the team of Ranger Silver Raptors completed their mock dogfight above the viewing stands, the team saluted the stand in a pass-by, and then shot up into the void of space, heading home to the home base, the Crescent Moon.

"Magnificent!" remarked the new ambassador to Jaspel.

"To be expected," was all that Commander Perry said.

"Click, click, click," continued Kela Kleeli,

seated beside the commander.

A non-committal, "Purrr," was all that escaped the feline lips of Carbi Panta.

Since mankind spread out to the stars, other races had been contacted, until all of the known universe had been settled, and the alien races formed an alliance of one government to insure the safety of each other. The governments of every world maintained their own fleet of space ships, but they were part of the Imperial Federation, and each had provided Special Rangers for the Space Patrol. These were the best pilots that each world had to offer, each taking orders from one command, should one world revolt, the Rangers were there to stop the conflict if possible. Or destroy the offending force, if necessary.

On the outskirts were small worlds without governments, some little more than rocks, where mines were worked for minerals and ores that were needed by other worlds. And in these outlying planets, at the far reaches of the Galactic Empire, pirates operated in spaceships as fast as anything the combined worlds had to offer. Most of these rocks were without police or authorities of any sort, where the strongest ruled the weakest, or the fastest ray gun settled an argument, or a knife in the back. Only when the Rangers were called in, was there any kind of civil authority in many of these places. Here, in these alien backwater worlds, where colonies strived to survive, were war-like races and privateers, often coming into conflict with decent pioneers still reaching out into the unknown. Since the Alliance Navy spends most of its time maintaining order at the core of the civilized galaxies, it pretty much ends up ignoring the fringe worlds, and their protection falls to the tough as nails brave men, women, and the robots of the free traders and journeymen who may be on these worlds in search of adventure, or to discover

some hidden secret of the planet's past.

Once a year, one of the Galactic Empire Alliances would host a spectacular display of the flight power of the Imperial Federation. Jaspas was one of the more recent worlds to join the Alliance, and this year, they were asked to play host to the dignitaries, and thus it was that the third planet in the binary system saw its first air show. Not that the Jaspas were in the least impressed.

All were thrilled to see such a display, even though the Jaspas were less a technical power than most; they preferred hand-to-hand battle with their enemies, and they seldom lost in such combat. Evolved from a cat race, they were fierce, feline fighters who moved with jungle instinct, and slashed with claws on their feet and hands, ripping their opponents apart with ease. Only the Taegu-ma warriors stood any chance against them, and that was because of their exoskeleton that covered their bodies, and protected their vital organs against the sharp claws of the cat people. A human didn't stand a chance against one in a fight. And the Jasper warrior wouldn't think twice about attacking a robot warrior!

Mankind had long since departed a depleted Earth eons in the past, leaving their home world behind where it was covered in wasteland, poisoned water, un-breathable air, and trash that cluttered its stone cities where nothing but animals lived now. Once FTL engines had been built, and faster than light-speed had been achieved, there was nothing to keep man from exploring the stars through Null-Space – or, Skipping, which is actually creating a shortcut through normal space. The solar system had quickly been settled, and some hearty souls attempted to terra-farm the planets like Mars and Pluto, but these proved a failure, and man reached further outward, eventually making contact with other civilizations that were stretching outward also. Technologies were exchanged, and world alliances formed, until

now there was little left to explore in the far distances. New worlds offered the hope that mankind needed, and new civilizations of mankind began.

Traders and prospectors, the pioneering malcontents, and the adventure seeking hurtled ever outward into uncharted worlds, beyond the settled frontiers of colonized civilizations and made preparations for the ever-spreading humanity. No human could ever say again that the Last Frontier had been breached. For beyond the Galaxy, mankind was still spreading. Always, the twinkling curtain of soft, blinking light beckoned to man. A billion and more stars were yet to feel the footsteps of man upon their planets. The Last Frontier was endless, yet it was now reachable, thanks to FTL engines.

But for those who had lost their ambition to explore the universe, the Galactic Empire Alliance was a growing combine of power and prestige. And there was still the need for the wild west sheriff to tame the Frontier, right here, in this Galactic Empire.

Now, with the air show concluded, the dignitaries were leaving the viewing stands. Commander Scott Perry stood up, and the gutsy old pilot looked over the diplomat in his dress uniform of black boots, blue pants, light blue tunics, and a waist cut blue jacket zipped to the stiff collars of his freshly pressed Ranger uniform. A black, leather belt stretched around his thick waist, with a large belt buckle carrying the fixed images of twin blaster pistols. On his waist hung twin deadly blasters.

Although wounded numerous times, he still had use of both arms and was a deadly shot with either. On his shoulders were the military braids of his rank, and on his left breast pocket was the insignia of the Space Patrol, which he commanded. Over his shoulders was wrapped a short, white cape, trimmed in black and gold, and his many

military medals covered his chest.

Standing beside him, Ambassador Membrane only came to Perry's shoulders, but the insect-like creature that stood beside him, was more than a head taller than the commander. Kela Kleeli was over seven foot tall, while the cat woman, Carbi Panta was only a little more than five and a half foot tall. The long arms of the mantis like Taegu-ma had a tendency to reach out ahead of them as they walked from the bleachers. What all the creatures in the viewing stand had in common were small translating devices hung around their necks that resembled a metallic radio transmitter. However, when turned on, the device would translate any language it was close enough to pick up into the spoken language of the one wearing the medallion.

"Come to my office, Commander," Ambassador Membrane ordered Perry once they were away from the crowd.

"Yes, Sir," Commander Perry said, "But I'll not be able to stay long. There is important business waiting for me back on the Crescent Moon."

"I would think you would appreciate being away from that hollowed out black moon for a while, Commander?" Membrane asked.

"Well, Sir, home is home, I think they used to say on Earth," Perry sighed.

"I believe it was 'Home Sweet Home', Perry, but it doesn't matter. Earth is far behind us now, and our future is the Galactic Empire! A man in your position should never forget that," the ambassador told him.

"Yes, Sir, I'll remember that, Mr. Ambassador," the Ranger told his superior.

Back in the ambassador's office, Membrane led his three companions into the inner room, and then directed the commander of the Rangers to sit in the only visitor chair in the room. The Taegu-ma set back on her hind haunches, its fore arms raised in a praying mantis position, while the Jaspa female stretched

out on the soft rug, purring as she rolled about the carpet.

"Commander," Ambassador Membrane began, "I've been asked by the Jaspel government to allow one of their people to spend some time with you on the Crescent Moon."

"One of their agents, you mean," Commander Perry snapped.

"Regardless of what she is, Commander, she will accompany you when you leave this planet!"

"She?" Commander Perry asked.

"Yes, Commander, Carbi Panta has been assigned to you for the next month at least," the ambassador told him.

Hearing a soft purr coming from the floor, Commander Perry looked towards the Jaspa female, who was now sitting up, grinning at him. He saw her lips move, but didn't hear her words, as the device on his neck began speaking the language he grew up with.

"Yes, Commander," the cat woman grinned, you must put up with me for a while. I'm sure you won't mind."

Kela Kleeli reached out with her upper arms, playfully, ruffling the cat woman's fur, and Carbi Panta snarled, quickly slashing at the long leg with one of her claws.

"Easy, cat," Kela Kleeli clacked, but the cat woman heard her words in her own language, "I could have you for lunch, should I desire."

Grinning broadly, Carbi Panta responded with, "I doubt it, Taegu-ma. You're lucky my people find you tasteless."

Turning towards the Ranger, her grin was broader as she said, "However, we do find humans to have a sweet meat when chewed well."

"Enough!" Commander Perry demanded. "Professor Kela Kleeli, you will see to the comfort of our guest for the trip to the

Crescent Moon. I think we should depart immediately, if there is no further instruction?" This last, he directed towards the ambassador.

"By all means, Commander, you are free to depart at any time. Your guest will instruct you when she is ready to return to her own planet. In the mean time, she will be treated as a VIP while on the Crescent Moon."

"By your leave, Sir," the commander came to attention and saluted the ambassador, then turned to Professor Kela Kleeli and Carbi Panta, "Shall we go?"

His own ship was parked on the rocket apron, guarded by Jaspal soldiers. As commander of the Space Rangers, he had his special ship, its markings were secret, and only a few trusted men knew what they were. He did not have a copilot, as he seldom took the ship out. On this special occasion, he had invited his head scientist, Doctor Kela Kleeli to accompany him to the binary star system of the Jaspel star range. Kela Kleeli was a qualified pilot, among many other things.

Although, all of the insect race held a deep hatred for most other races, especially the humans, Kela Kleeli had been on hand when the orphaned boy, Steve Danger had been rescued when his parents, space immigrants had been killed by alien space raiders. When the Space Rangers found the ten-year-old boy, they brought him back to the Crescent Moon with them, where the mother instincts of the Taegu-ma scientist kicked in. The little boy had touched her heart, and she took him under her tutelage, teaching him formal education.

Now that the boy had grown into a man, she followed his quick rise through the ranks of the Space Rangers with great pride. Never having a brewed of her own, Professor Kela Kleeli considered the human to be from her own hive.

During her many years on the Crescent Moon, the scientist had became extremely valuable to Commander Perry, not only in her

capacity as head of scientific investigations, but she often accompanied the commander to important diplomatic meetings between new races and the political hierarchy of the Galactic Empire.

The Taegu-ma had evolved from a predator class, never knowing fear, only battle between foes, and they were a fierce fighter, whether male or female, and were lacking in the emotion humans knew as fear.

Somewhere during their evolution, their race had obtained intelligence, although their technology was on par with most of the civilization they encountered, they prided themselves in their vast commerce structure; their own home world is a hothouse the year round, without seasons, and they detest worlds with cold temperatures.

There had been no cat races on any of the worlds they had conquered, and they automatically hated the Jaspas the instant they were introduced to the race. It was hatred even stronger than what they held for the humans.

For the cat races ate the insects of their own worlds!

And in the Jaspas, the Taegu-mas found a foe they could not easily defeat in battle!

Kela Kleeli watched as Carbi Panta came aboard the commander's rocket for their return flight back to the Crescent Moon. The cat woman moved like a jungle creature from an untamed planet. Sleek, feline, muscles rippling beneath the orange fur, like she was caged lightning ready to strike with her deadly claws. Her natural instincts were to reach out with those long mantis-like forearms and grasp the cat woman in a hold she could not break, and then bite through that feline neck with her own strong teeth.

Carbi Panta saw the evil look in Kela-Kleeli's eyes and snarled a soft, polite warning to watch her step!

Commander Scott Perry was already aboard, seeing that the ship had not been sabotaged while parked on the rocket pad.

"Prepare for flight, Doctor," he ordered Kela Kleeli, and then to Carbi Panta, he said. "Sit at one of the extra chairs provided for my guests, Miss Panta."

Although the commander's ship was the same as all of the Silver Raptor class rockets, each ship had been equipped for a pilot and copilot in the early days. Only later, were a few more seats added to each ship. It was a small ship, mostly engine, equipped for fast speed and maneuverability, but could comfortably accommodate six, ten in an emergency, though the more in the ship, the less comfort for those traveling the spaceways.

Once the commander and Carbi Panta were seated securely, Doctor Kela Kleeli blasted off from the rocket pad in a fiery eruption of flame, until the rocket was off the pad, and then Commander Perry ordered:

"Null-Space drive, Doctor, let's Skip."

Skipping through Null-Space was like taking a short cut through a back alley, instead of going all the way around the block. Once Kela Kleeli had set the coordinates for the drive, the Null-Drive engines did the rest, bending space — or cutting through the alley — and coming out in the quadrant the pilot or copilot had fed into the coordinates. Traveling great distances was achieved through the FTL engines.

The clicking from Kela Kleeli alerted Commander Perry that they would be coming out of Null-Space shortly, and he turned on the view screen to watch as the familiar quadrant burst into sight.

Located in the region of the Fringe Worlds, the Crescent Moon is a hollowed out moon, hidden within a cluster of moons and large asteroids, effectively concealing it from prying eyes. It is a strategic factor in maintaining the upper hand against the space raiders. The moon houses two thousand spacers, and

maintains a powerful armory of high tech weapons, and central communications command and intelligence center, complete with doctors, theaters, and other entertainment facilities.

There are sixty-eight Silver Raptor class rocket ships constantly on duty at the Crescent Moon, each is commanded by a pilot captain, and a lieutenant copilot. The enlisted ranks consist of Spacer 1st Class, Spacer 2nd Class, and Sergeant, who is head of departments. These are the elite from all the allied worlds.

Although the Imperial Federation offers more opportunity for officers and enlisted men, their ranks are filled with the less dedicated, the less disciplined, and only the best volunteer for the Space Rangers! And only the best of those are accepted! There are only 136 Space Rangers at any given time. When one is killed, he or she is replaced by the best waiting to join their ranks, be it human or alien, man or woman.

"There she is, Kela Kleeli!" Commander Perry sighed as the Crescent Moon came into sight.. For Commander Scott Perry, there was no other home. His life was the Crescent Moon. When he died, it would be in a space battle with some space pirate, or of old age on the hollowed out moon.

Again, the clicking from the Taegu-ma had no need for interpretation. She, too, had spent most of her adult life on the hidden base in space, and although she had memories of a childhood on her native planet, she had also grown to love the space station where she worked and intermingled with so many different races of men. Some day, she might even learn to love the cat people. Well, maybe not, she grinned, as the smelly cat stood over her shoulder to view the moon base for the first time in its life.

The commander's rocket was being monitored by radar, as it came out of Null-Space, and a voice penetrated the confined

space of the little cabin.

"Commander, we have your position on radar. Please identify yourself, and we will give you coordinates for landing."

Pressing the send button, Commander Perry gave a coded reply to the inquiry. It was his special identity code. Every Silver Raptor crew had their own special code. It wouldn't do for a space pirate to land inside the moon base with their heavy weapons, as they could do unfathomable damage to the space station before they could be destroyed.

"You have permission to land, Commander," the voice continued. "The bay door will open for your ship shortly. We Protect."

"We Protect," repeated the commander, as he took control of the ship, bringing it in towards the docking bay of the moon base. As the voice had promised, the large, metal bay door began opening to receive the rocket, and the commander effortlessly piloted the Silver Raptor into the parking bay and set the big ship down in the stall allotted the station commander.

CHAPTER TWO

The Crescent Moon

A Small robo-car was waiting for the crew to disembark the spacecraft. When the three passengers climbed aboard the small vehicle, Commander Perry inserted a memory card in a slot on the dashboard, and then ordered, "Take us to the Commander's office."

"At once," replied the automatic voice on the robo-car, and the vehicle shot off at a tremendous speed, forcing the passengers to grab hold of special handrails. All robo-cars were fitted with voice destination grids; the passenger just named the destination, and the robo-car automatically connected its guides to the grid, and never failed to reach a spoken destination.

Carbi Panta snarled at the robotic vehicle, her fur puffing up on the back of her orange neck. It was plain that she could smell the oil and grease associated with a robot. To the Jaspas, a living thing should provide food for another living creature, and robots were not food material, so were contrary to the laws of nature, and something a cat detested. She again looked at Kela Kleeli and licked her lips.

The Taegu-ma saw the Jaspa's facial movement and tried to mimic the gesture, but her attempt was only to run her long tongue over hundreds of tiny, but sharp teeth. Carbi Panta understood the mimicry and snarled at Kela Kleeli also.

When they arrived at the commander's office, the door automatically opened, and the three stepped through. Once inside, Commander Perry told his head scientist, "We need to find quarters for Miss Panta, would it be okay if she stayed with you?"

There was an immediately hiss from Carbi Panta, and a clack, clack, clack from Kela Kleeli, which the commander took as a resounding, "No!" from both parties.

"Then we'll have to make other arrangements," grinned the commander.

Two days after his return to the Crescent Moon, Commander Perry received a request from one of the mining planets in the Fringe Worlds, asking for a team of investigators to look into some vicious murders in the Valdez mines on Vagadiaga. Since the mines provided a lot of the ores and metals the Galactic Empire relied upon, the Rangers were ordered to investigate instead of the Imperial Federation.

Sending a reply via Null-Radio, Commander Perry requested more information on the murders from the authorities asking for his help. Soon, a digital image was sent across space, to be picked up by the Crescent Moon's

massive communication center, and a virtual video was prepared for his viewing of the last murder. After watching the scene of the murder play out on his desktop, Commander Perry issued a call for Captain Steve Danger.

"Steve Danger is on patrol in sector M today, Commander, shall we call him back, or wait till his duty is over?" the sergeant in communications asked.

"Is anything happening in Sector M, Sergeant?" Commander Perry asked.

"No, Sir, everything appears quiet," the sergeant said.

"Then call him home, Sergeant. Immediately!" Commander Perry demanded.

"Yes, Sir," the sergeant replied, quickly getting a message off to Silver Raptor #1.

Shaking his head, the commander wondered, silently, why all of his personnel couldn't be intelligent officers, instead of numbskull enlisted men!

When Kela Kleell heard that Steve Danger was coming in, she immediately headed for the commander's office. As it happened, Carbi Panta also heard that something was afoot, and wanted to see what was happening, so the two alien women were with the commander later that day, when Captain Steve Danger and his copilot, Lieutenant Cathy Rogers entered the office.

Captain Steve was wearing his Space Rangers uniform; black boots, gray pants, light blue tunics, waist-cut gray jacket that zipped all the way up to stiff collars. The insignia of Space Patrol was over his left breast pocket, and on his right shoulder was a patch with his ship number, "1". Steve was tall, extremely handsome, ruggedly built, with soft blond hair and flake gold eyes, with skin bronzed by having visited the worlds of too many suns.

Lieutenant Cathy Rogers was wearing a similar uniform. She was a fantastic, statuesque, beautiful woman, with long, jet-black hair and bright blue eyes. She looks and functions like a human woman, but is stronger, faster, and

nearly invulnerable. She is a robot, cool and emotionless, except when it comes to Steve.

As they entered the room, Steve immediately hugged Kela Kleell's thin, exoskeleton neck, and then saluted his commander, as the Taegu-ma gently caressed his backside with one long arm.

Carbi Panta sniffed at Cathy Rogers, and growled, as she walked by her, and then the cat woman rubbed her side up against Steve Danger and started purring like a kitten.

"Here we go again," Cathy Rogers said, giving the Jaspa female an ugly look.

"Shut up, Lieutenant," Captain Danger told his copilot, and then gently pushed the cat woman off of him. He knew how his copilot sometimes got when another woman showed him any interest, and he wanted to head off any kind of confrontation before it started.

Turning back to Commander Perry, he asked: "You wanted to see me, Sir?"

"Yes, Steve," the commander said, "I have an assignment for you on one of the Fringe Worlds."

He stopped, and then pressed a button on his desk, and asked: "Is the conference room ready?"

A voice on the other end replied that it was.

"Come," he said, "let's all retire to the conference room, and I will explain the situation once we are there."

They left the commander's office, and walked down the hallway towards a set of double doors at the end of the hall. The cat woman, Carbi Panta, cuddled against Steve Danger as they walked down the hall.

Cathy Rogers pretended the cat woman was a figment of her imagination, and put the Jaspa out of her mind.

When they entered the conference room, eight people were already seated around a large circular desk. All were familiar

with each other, except for Carbi Panta, who did not know any of the personnel at the table, so as they were seated, Commander Perry introduced everyone to their recently arrived guest from the Jaspel star system.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce, Miss Carbi Panta, one of the new members to the Galactic Empire, from the binary star system we know as Jaspel."

"Miss Panta, these folks are, starting to your right, and going around the table:

"Doctor Cosmo, a xeno-biologist and botanist." Panta saw a particular handsome human male, with curly black hair and pale blue eyes. But one sniff told her he was a robot. Actually, he was built on the planet, Zimco, and returned to that planet occasionally to get updates on his built in information. Since his last visit, Zimco had been destroyed by a dangerous species from another galaxy. Now, his built-in human emotions craved to find the ones who had destroyed his world and his creators.

"Next is Professor Proda, one of our leading scientist on the Crescent Moon." This time, Panta saw a Trangonadan humanoid, which she knew from studies of races in her history book, had been a race of gypsies. Proda was tall, rail thin, with four arms and a mop of long white hair, and wears wraparound sunglasses all of the time. What Panta didn't know, was that Proda was a member of the Fellowship of Psazr, a quasi-religious order that devotes itself to studying the universe and other cultures.

"Please do not try to figure the next gentleman out, Miss Panta. The body that Doctor Ti Po occupies is merely an android receptacle, which he designed for his own use. Doctor Ti Po is a sentient energy cloud, which none of us really understand." Panta merely growled at the thing, and went on down the table.

"And next is our special military liaison to the Space Patrol, Lieutenant Commander Boris Karloft of the Alliance Navy." Panta saw a small human, maybe five foot six inches tall, with a

stocky build. Very close cropped blond hair and a rugged, rough n' ready overall appearance. His flattened nose looked like some one had punched him once too often in the face. She recognized the alley-cat type that the Naval Officer resembled, as she had seen many of her own species just like him.

Smiling, the commander slapped the next man on the back. "For this special mission, I've asked for two of our best teams to fly in support of Captain Steve Danger. This, Miss Panta, is Captain Johnny DeToro, captain of Silver Raptor #2." Panta saw a tall, slender man, with wavy dark hair and steel-gray eyes, and could tell immediately that this was a stiff-necked, by the looks officer a few years older than Steve Danger.

"They say, Miss Panta, that nothing of value ever came out of Capri Del Vry, but I disagree. Lieutenant Anthony "Tony" Duprey is certainly the exception!" Capri Del Vry? Yes, Panta had heard of the planet. Mostly a tourist planet, with a carnival atmosphere, ran by humans looking to fleece any and all suckers they could find. Five foot ten inches tall, dark features, short black hair, and a thick mustache, he had once been a ship's captain, but demoted to copilot status because of a short temper and quick fists.

"A mission would be incomplete without two wingmen, so meet Captain Van Goth, Miss Panta. His ship is Silver Raptor #3; Captain Van Goth will fly the right wing of Steve Danger, while #2 will fly his left wing. A better combination you'll never find." Panta recognized the captain as a Jareen, a somewhat mysterious race of beings, although humanoid, they are tall and willowy, with skin so pale as to be almost albino. Sensitive to light, they wear robes and hoods and goggles when in Human environments. Their race is highly advanced, and their technology is based on crystals, and guarded jealously.

"Our last member of the team you may

already know, Miss Panta. I understand that Lieutenant Mal-Tellern is quite famous among the Jaspas." Grinning like her ancestors, Panta made a slashing motion with her paws in the air, reminding the lieutenant that she had heard of the fight he had picked with one of her countrymen, only to almost result in his own death. Mal-Tellern could only give her an evil look in return, and then he stood, angrily and questioned the commander:

"Why should we be the wingmen for a human? We are the best fighting team in your service."

"Second only to me, Taegu-ma," corrected Steve Danger.

"I'll take you apart, Human!" Mal-Tellern snarled as he started over the table.

Steve reached for his blaster in a threatening manner, but before he could draw his weapon, two females stood between them: Carbi Panta and Kela Kleelt.

"You're lucky, Danger, you are protected by females!"

Laughing, Steve corrected him again, "I see it the other way, Taegu-ma, it looks to me like they just saved your life!"

"They're always like this," growled Cathy Rogers, sitting with her head in her hands.

"If you children will settle down, we'll finish this conference and be about our duties," snarled the commander with a wide grin on his face. He knew that most of the in-fighting was bluff and bolstering among Rangers, but once the mission was started, they would work together like well-oiled machinery.

"I think the rest you know, Miss Panta. You've been around them for a while now. Kela Kleelt, Cathy Rogers, myself, and Steve Danger!"

Carbi Panta sat down beside Captain Danger, and her purring was almost unbearable.

"Oh my god!" Cathy Rogers cried. "This cat woman is going to be a problem, I just know it!"

CHAPTER THREE

Murder In The Mines

"Watch the center of my desk," ordered Commander Perry. "The virtual reality video will show you the scene as it happened in the mines of Vagadiaga, in the star system of Caprino. From all the data I have on the planet, it is a large earth-like world with an atmosphere more suitable to Steve Danger and Cathy Rogers, so it will be their mission to land and investigate, while Silver Raptors 2 & 3 patrol the space around the planet, and provide fire power if necessary, unless Captain Danger deems otherwise.

"There is a rocket pad located on the planet, and I will give Captain Danger that co-ordination before you leave. But I understand the mines are some distance from the rocket pad. Rail cars are ran daily from the pad to the many mines on the planet, but they are for the transportation of ores and metals. The occasional hitchhiker will ride one of the rail cars when he's had enough of the mines, however I wouldn't suggest it for my Rangers. Be sure you have your rocket packs serviced before you leave the Crescent Moon.

"The mine owner, is Aldo Feneman, but he probably won't be able to meet you at the rocket pad to lead you to the mines, so your best bet is to obtain directions once you arrive. Is all of that understood?"

"Will anyone accompany us?" Steve asked.

"No," Commander Perry acknowledged.
"Yes," purred Carbi Panta.

"What?" Cathy Rogers cried. "It's always just me and the Captain, no one else."

"Our orders are to give Miss Panta every desire she craves," the commander smiled.

"You're making a mistake,

Commander," Cathy Rogers said. "She'll just be in our way!"

"Hush! Now watch the table," he ordered.

Instantly, there appeared a scene, fuzzy at first, but the camera finally focused and they could see several men with pick axes chopping away at the wall of a mine, their human bodies glistening with sweat as they worked in the heat of the mine pits. An ore bucket was parked on tracks just out of range, but you could see the front end of the cart and the tracks that ran through the tunnels.

Suddenly, the men began jerking in spasms, and all at once, the members of the conference could see blood appear on the bodies as they fell to the dirt and bullets continued to strike them. Then the video ended.

"Whew!" Tony Duprey said.

"Murder," Johnny DeiToro agreed.

"But it wasn't done with a blaster," Commander Perry said. "It looked like old fashioned bullets. But I haven't seen a gun like that in ages!"

"I thought I saw something," Doctor Cosmo said.

"Yes, you did," the sentient being called Doctor Ti Po told him. "I saw it too!"

"What did you see?" Commander Perry asked.

"Run the scene from the mine again," instructed Doctor Ti Po.

"We'll tell you when to stop it in play," Doctor Cosmo finished.

Commander Perry started the virtual reality video once more, and the scene in the mines began playing out once more on his desktop. Again, they watched as the men carved ore from the rock, and then fell to the floor dying from old-fashioned bullet wounds.

"Stop!" Doctor Cosmo cried suddenly. "See it?" he asked.

"I don't see anything," admitted the commander.

"Look at the wall on the left," suggested

Doctor Ti Po.

"Yes, there is something, a shadow, maybe?"

"A woman," laughed Lieutenant Commander Boris Karloff.

"Yes, the shadow on the wall is that of a human female," stated Doctor Ti Po.

"Purrr" Carbi Panta continued to pay all of her attention to Steve Danger.

"If that will be all, I think we should let our mission team prepare for their journey through the Fringe Worlds. Remember, Rangers, those mines are important to the Galactic Empire, and if there is someone actively engaged in sabotaging them by murdering the workers, then we must bring that person or persons to justice as quickly as possible. I have all the confidence of the Space Rangers, that our team will succeed in that mission.

"We Protect!" he saluted.

"We Protect!" they said, as they returned his salute.

Captain Steve Danger ordered Cathy Rogers to take his ship out of the Crescent Moon orbit and into space, as he programmed the coordinates into the system for the star system of Caprino, their destination, several light years from their space station on the hollowed out moon.

Cap Danger programmed his coordinates into the system, and then spoke over his radio: "Steve calling ships one and two, come in one and two!"

Shortly, he heard Mai-Tellern acknowledge, and then Tony Duprey reported in.

"Rangers," Steve continued, "I'm going to need your help more than ever this time. With a V.I.P. on board, I am going to be called upon to entertain her while my copilot operates the ship. Cathy will also keep an eye on the radar screen, too, but I would sure feel

safers knowing that all eyes were on the look out for bandits. I'll be here should I need to pilot the Silver Raptor and man the blasters if we do run into any problems, though. I'll need you fellas on my wings for sure if we run into danger. Just remember, I'm the one being distracted!"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," came back from Mal-Tellern, which wouldn't translate into anything. The Taegu-ma was breaking up with laughter over Cap Danger's situation with the Jaspa female.

"That's not funny, Mal-Tellern!" Steve yelled over the radio.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," an out of control Taegu-ma laughed.

Then young Tony Duprey broke in, with: "What do you expect, Danger? Ever since that Jaspa female came aboard, you haven't had eyes for me, or any one else. It's a wonder Cathy is able to control her jealousy. Come back to us, Steve!" Tony giggled.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," continued Mal-Tellern.

"Oh, hell!" Cap Danger ejaculated as he turned red and slammed the button closed on the radio.

"They're just having fun at your expense, Captain," Cathy Rogers told him. "But I do wish you would put her in a cage or something. Her purring is going to drive me crazy!"

"Oh, you shut up, too!" Steve turned back to his controls.

Carbi Panta wasn't paying Cathy Rogers any attention, or anything else for that matter, except for Captain Steve Danger. She persisted in standing behind him and purring like a kitten. Steve was afraid the Jaspa female would be curling up in his lap before the mission was over, and if that happened, he would never live it down. He knew that he had to complete this mission and fast, if he was ever going to keep his own sanity!

The radio crackled again, and this time, Captain Johnny Delforo's voice shot over the

void of space:

"Danger, don't you dare take advantage of that young lass!"

"I was wondering when you'd get in on the act, Delforo," Steve answered him. "It took you a while to think of a come back, though, didn't it?"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," Mal-Tellern continued.

After breaking out of the asteroid belt, which hid the Crescent Moon from detection, Cap Danger set his destination for the Capriño Star, and sat back to monitor his radar screen.

Here was always the possible danger of pirates and rogue outlaws looking to attack lone rockets traveling in the Fringe Worlds. He knew that Silver Raptors #1 & 2 were hidden from the eyes of others, as they were looking for a fight. But Steve just wanted to reach Vagadiaga and investigate the murders in the mines and return Carbi Panta to the Crescent Moon without incident. The quicker this mission was finished, the quicker he would have his ship back under control.

Just about the time Captain Danger spotted the blip on his radar screen, Cathy Rogers let out a yell; she had spotted it at the same time, and grabbed the controls. Carbi Panta now stood beside him, as if anxious to see what he would do next.

"Here they come!" Cap Danger ejaculated.

"Dammit, Rangers, I've got problems!" Steve screamed over the radio. "Blips are popping up all over my radar screen. I've got my hands full with something dogging my ship. Be ready to intervene if things get hot!"

"Intervene with the cat?" Tony Duprey chuckled.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," Mal-Tellern clicked.

"With the blips, you idiots," Danger yelled at his team.

"They're not being nice, are they?"

asked Cathy Rogers.

"Seems like he could share some of the women, some times," Johnny DelToro suggested. "I've always thought Steve was stingy when it came to the women!"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," Mal-Tellern continued.

A blaster beam shot passed his rocket, but the on-coming ship fired too soon. Cathy Rogers made a quick roll and dived out of the path of a second shot that was better aimed, and then came around in a fast sweeping curve, headed straight for the lead cruiser, while Cap Danger manipulated the blasters, pumping deadly burst towards the attacking ships as they advanced.

"We're under attack, Silver Raptors," he yelled. "Looks like pirates. A whole mess of 'em! Where are my wingmen? I'm all alone out here!"

Out of nowhere, two Silver Raptors struck like lightning, their blasters cutting two pirate ships to ribbons before they could escape their destruction. Dropping out of the black void of space, the pirates hadn't seen them coming.

Now, they were in a fight for their very survival, against the best ships the Galactic Alliance had to offer. Where they thought they were looking at a lone spacer, suddenly three Space Ranger Silver Raptors were in their midst, taking deadly toll.

"We Protect!" screamed Captain DelToro.

"We Protect!" Clicked Lieutenant Mal-Tellern, and the laugh he emitted this time wasn't humorous at all, but deadly serious, for he was in a battle to the death, something he loved more than life itself!

"We Protect!" repeated Captain Steve Danger, and the deadly dogfight was on in full force.

At least twelve pirate ships had begun the attack, but they were quickly reduced to ten, and then seven remained, as Ranger blasters cut them in half as Silver Raptors, manned by seasoned space pilots, maneuvered in and out of the melee in twisting, rolling, and slashing moves

the pirates could not keep up with. But to save their skin, the pirates fought back with all the skill they had. They hadn't become space pirates to run at the first sign of danger. In their evil breasts, beat the hearts of brave men, savage though they may have been.

Captain DelToro's ship took a glancing slash from a destructive beam, ripping a gash in her side, and Tony Duprey zeroed in on one of the remaining pirate ships and aimed head on for the craft, thinking of ramming it in a final blaze of death. But before they collided, Mal-Tellern's Silver Raptor shot ahead of the damaged Silver Raptor and Captain Van Goth blasted the pirate ship into oblivion, just as DelToro's ship flew through the scattering debris of the destroyed pirate ship.

Soon, only four pirate ships remained, and they turned tail and headed off to unknown parts of space. The radio crackled and a feminine voice came across the air, "You win this time Space Rangers, but I'll be prepared for you next time!"

"Tanya Fels!" Cap Danger ejaculated. "I thought that was your ship, Black Leopard. Unfortunately, your men don't fight as well as you."

"Captain Danger, is that you?" Tanya Fels, The Black Leopard asked. "If I had known you were leading the squad of Rangers, I would have personally brought you down today!"

"You tried, Lady," Cap Danger laughed, "but as usual, your ship is too slow, I don't care if you are flying a captured Navy fighter, even the Surge can't stand up against a Silver Raptor. Better luck next time. But I would suggest you pick a better crew to follow you in the future."

"See you around the galaxy, Captain Danger, but watch your back, you never know it'll be me until I've poisoned your food, or slipped a knife in your back!"

"I might not recognize you, Tanya, but

I'd know your pimp, Ya-zahr if I ever see his ugly face."

"Be careful who you're talking about, Captain Danger, I love Ya-zahr!"

"Well, there's no accounting for taste," he laughed.

Captain Steve Danger turned his course back towards Vagadiaga, and the Caprino Star system, and Captain Johnny DeToro quickly joined on his left wing. But Captain Van Goth and Mal-Tellern were in pursuit of the pirate ships.

"Captain Van Goth," Steve ordered, "Return to my wing position at once." He ordered.

"We're coming, Ranger," Van Goth acknowledged shortly.

"I could have ended them all," they heard Mal-Tellern argue a minute later, but his ship quickly took up position on his right wing a minute later.

"Well done, Rangers," Steve Danger told them. "We Protect!"

"We Protect!" was chorused by both wing ships.

"We'd better stop on the first available rock to make some quick repairs, Steve," Tony advised. "I'm not sure this Silver Raptor can continue to Vagediaga the way it's damaged."

I think we'll be coming up on Pellucidario shortly. It is rich in oxygen content, but the planet is in its early stages of evolution, and there are some pretty mean monsters around. We'll have to land, and be quick with those repairs, and then blast back off before we wake up the neighborhood."

"Right you are, Team Leader," Tony Duprey laughed.

"Damn world is probably over run with beautiful women," Johnny DeToro said, "and Danger doesn't want us to find out!"

"Yeah, well, these women will eat you alive," Steve told them over the radio. "Just make sure your blasters are working properly!"

"What's man like on this planet?" Mal-

Tellern asked in his clicks.

"Man doesn't exist on the planet yet, Mal-Tellern, just the predators!" Steve told him.

"Good," Mal-Tellern said, "I think I'm going to like Pellucidano, cluck, cluck, cluck," he laughed.

"He'll change his mind the first time something tries to eat him," Cap Danger laughed, and then imitated the ducking sound Mal-Tellern made when he laughed.

"Up ahead, Team. The star system you see coming into view on your screens. We'll be there in a few minutes at this speed," Captain Danger continued.

"Follow me in, and be on the look out for bandits, though I don't know why anyone would hang out in this star system," he told his wingmen.

Danger dipped below the bright ball of fire as he came in, searching underneath the sun for the speck he knew would be there once they were out of the glare of the sun's rays.

"There it is, below us," Steve yelled over the radio, and tried to keep Carbi Panta from sitting in his lap as he maneuvered the Silver Raptor towards the planet below.

As they came closer, Johnny DeToro said, "Whew, look at that cloud cover. I sure hope we don't hit any mountain tops when we duck below them."

"You had better worry more about trees than mountains. There's lots of flat land, oceans and forest, with trees reaching into the moist clouds. It's paradise, except for the monsters," Cap Danger warned his team.

"As we go in, watch for a large enough clearing for our three rockets to set down, with plenty of room to spare. We don't want to be confined in a small space if we're attacked."

"I thought you told Mal-Tellern there were no men on Pellucidario?" Captain

DeiToro asked.

"That's true," Steve laughed, "but there are plenty of predators!"

As they entered the planet's cloudbank, Steve warned again: "Watch your radar, if there are obstacles, it will warn us. Come in slow now, the clouds are thick, but there should be enough light to work by on the surface."

Breaking through the clouds finally, the space pilots saw a magnificent landscape below them. Forests and rivers stretched out from one horizon to the next, while thin rays of sunlight penetrated to the ground below, like bright arrows through holes in the clouds; giant trees did appear to reach up to touch the clouds in places.

"This looks like a good place to leave our V.I.P." Cathy Rogers said, as the view of the jungle came in sight.

"There is a plateau to our right, Captain Van Goth said over the radio. "It looks like it is large enough for the three ships."

"I see it, Rangers," Steve acknowledged. "Let's swing around and check it out. If it looks safe enough, we can sat down and repair Silver Raptor #2."

"What's that down below us?" Tony Duprey asked, suddenly.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" Steve shot back.

"Those damn things are as big as a house on Zanthodon," Lieutenant Duprey said in awe.

"One of those things could damage our ships, Steve," Johnny DeiToro argued. "What in hell were you thinking, coming to a world like this?"

"It'll be okay, Captain," Steve told him. "You, Tony and I can make the repairs, while Captain Van Goth, Mal-Tellern and Cathy Rogers watch for the predators. If they come too close, just shoo them off with a blaster!"

"I just hope a blaster will work against one of those things," Cathy Rogers said.

"A blaster will work against anything,

except maybe a sentient cloud energy like Doctor Ti Po, and I don't know if any of those creatures still exist, besides our good doctor.

"Okay, Rangers, let's set down on that plateau, and see what we can do temporarily to repair Silver Raptor #2," Steve ordered.

Hearing Tony Duprey whistle as they swung their ships towards the plateau, Cap Danger looked out of his view screen to see a giant waterfall off in the distance, that was spewing a cloud of spray into the air a hundred feet as the mighty river of water flowed off the tall cliff to strike the river below.

"Yeah, I see it," whistled Steve. "What a beautiful sight on such a primitive world!"

Cap Danger left his auxiliary engine pumping energy, while Cathy Rogers projected a giant spotlight from the nose of Silver Raptor #1, and shined it directly on the damaged area of Silver Raptor #2. Captain Van Goth did the same from Silver Raptor #3, and then he and Lieutenant Mal-Tellern began watch for dangerous predators in their vicinity, while Cathy did the same from Silver Raptor #1.

Wearing magnetic boots, the repair crew climbed up the ship's surface until they reached the wide rip in its hull. Locating a control box that opened from the outside, they found attachments for their welding equipment and began welding the metal hull back together where it had split. It wasn't an easy task, as they had to salvage some metal plates from the interior of Silver Raptor #2 to fill some fairly large gaps in places.

Carbi Panta had left Silver Raptor #1 and was trying to climb the steep sides of the ship to get to Steve Danger. When Steve yelled for her to return to the ship, she just tried that much harder to reach him. He finally gave up and just shook his head at her foolishness.

"Steve," Johnny DeiToro said, "if I live

to be a hundred, I'll never understand what kind of control you have over women!"

"Captain," Steve said, "some people have it, some people don't. Right now, I wish you had it, and not me!"

They were caught off guard when they were attacked suddenly from the air. Van Goth and Mal-Tellern had been concerned with the giant lizard creatures on the surface, and hadn't been watching the sky. When the winged pterodactyl dropped on top of them, one claw-like appendage grasped hold of Cap Danger's shoulder, and if he hadn't thought as fast as he did, the monster lizard bird would have carried him from the ship, magnetic boots et al.

As severe pain gripped his shoulder, Danger raised the welding torch and ran it across the creature's leg, causing it to scream in terrible pain, releasing its hold on Steve's shoulder, and flapping back into the air. A beam shot from Silver Raptor #1, cutting the flying monster in two before it could escape. But it had already done its damage, blood was running down Cap Danger's shoulder, and he had to get back inside his ship and treat the wound before it got infected.

"I'm done for, Rangers," Steve told DeToro and Duprey. "I've got to treat this wound right away."

"We'll finish up here, Steve," Tony told him. "It shouldn't be much longer. Besides, I see a nurse down there looking at that injured shoulder like a slice of chocolate cake!"

Back inside his ship, Cap Danger removed his uniform jacket and washed the blood from his shoulder, and then Cathy Rogers and Carbi Panta were ministering all kinds of ointments and salves to the torn skin where the lizard's claws had dug in. He hoped the girls knew what they were doing.

They did.

By the time the repairs were complete, the day on Pellucidario was coming to an end, and with the shape and condition everyone was in,

Captain Danger decided it would be best for them to get a good night's sleep on the primitive world, and after a restful night, they could start out fresh the next day. Each ship put its spotlight on rotation motion, and Steve figured that should be enough to keep predators away during the night. If any did manage to get past the lights, and bumped into the ships, an alarm would sound, waking the Rangers up. However, they slept through the night without any disturbance, and were well rested the next morning.

After a breakfast of nutritional cookies, the Space Rangers blasted off the surface of Pellucidario and struck out for Vagadiaga once more.

CHAPTER FOUR

Vagadiaga

The mining world of Vagadiaga was still beautiful, although some areas were starting to show signs of a raped land. Where once had been untouched landscape of golden soil, mixed with black veins of ore stretched from one corner to the other, now, great crevasses of the land were opened for the taking of ores and metals needed elsewhere.

The Rangers came in low, surveying the world before they turned their ships towards the great city of Callisto, named after the explorer who had found it rich in ores a century ago; so far, only one city had been built on Vagadiaga, and it was best centralized to accommodate the mines and transport rockets that arrived daily to extract loads of expensive ore. Here, too, were representatives from most of the civilizations of the Galactic Empire, as their worlds were all in need of exhausted minerals, ores and metals to replenish their own planets.

Where there was such immense wealth located in one place, there was sure to be pirates and fortune hunters seeking their own claims in an untamed atmosphere. Some off-worlders and mine owners paid a percentage tribute to certain pirate bands to guard their ships in transport until they reached Naval security zones. Yet, rogue pirate bands created chaos even for the pirates at times. It wasn't uncommon for a pirate crew to escort one shipment to safety, and on their return trip, attack and steal a shipment guarded by a rival pirate band. There was seldom any honor among thieves in the Fringe World zones.

Landing their Silver Raptors on the rocket pads at Callisto, the Space Rangers contacted the airport authority, and provided security for their ships, before entering the main airport lounge. They had brought their rocket packs, and planned on flying to the mines they were to investigate, but first, they planned on eating at the famous airport restaurant that bragged of the greatest cuisine of the universe.

Unfortunately, Steve Danger ran into problems the minute he stepped into the lobby of the airport. There appeared to be a confrontation going on between a particularly lovely young girl with flowing blue-black hair, and an eye-watering figure, and an ugly rust-green colored reptilian Giacodon male, with a long tail and three eyes.

Steve was somewhat shocked by the creature's actions, as the Giacodon's were usually a pacifist race, loving beauty and philosophy and normally were negotiating to settle disputes, not causing them. But this lizard was making a nuisance of himself with the young girl, and Steve never hesitated when it came to rescuing young women in distress. It helped, as well, when they were young and beautiful, like this long-haired, shapely girl was.

And for Steve, to think was to act, so before his team knew what was happening, Cap Danger was rushing forward, anger written over

his face. When he reached the girl, he yanked her from the grasp of the reptilian male, and slung her behind him. When the lizard went after her again, Steve swung a powerful uppercut that collided with the under-jaw of the Giacodon, and the creature wobbled from the blow.

It must have seen the anger on Cap Danger's face for the first time now, as it backed away from his blazing eyes, and then turned and rushed off to disappear into another section of the airport.

Steve turned and found the pretty young woman prone on the airport floor, and reached down to pick her up.

"Thank you, Sir," she said in a voice almost too low for normal hearing.

Danger could tell the young girl was part human, but he wasn't sure what else she might be. That she was a mix-breed was quite evident, though.

"Are you all right, Miss? Steve asked.

"Yes, Sir," she said. "How can I ever thank you? You have saved my life, for sure!"

"What was the trouble here?" Steve asked.

"I would rather not say, Sir, you might think bad of me, if you knew."

"Cluck, duck, cluck," laughed Mai-Tellern.

"Here we go again," cackled Tony Duprey.

Now there were two girls hanging onto Steve like he was the last man in the universe! Even if his ego was having fun, he was slightly embarrassed at the situation. After all, a Space Ranger must always conduct himself in a way that is a credit to the force, and right now, everyone in the airport was staring at them and shaking whatever passed as their heads. He knew that this situation had to end pretty quickly, or he might become a vulgar rumor among the planets.

"This just gets better and better," Cathy

Rogers shook her head sadly.

"There's the restaurant," Cap Danger pointed out to the others. "What say we grab a bite to eat before we leave for the mining zone?"

"All of us?" Laughed Tony.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," laughed Mal-Tellern.

"All of us!" snapped Danger, as he headed for the restaurant, with the two girls holding to his arms.

Once they were seated, they were waited on by a Torabon, one of the many Torabonaborugui working as waiters in the restaurant. They were only about one meter tall, they were covered with blue fur, their three eyes timid but sneaky. From the menu, it appeared that the restaurant employed cooks from every species, as there were special plates in every language known to the Galactic Empire. The Torabon all had language translators around their necks, and never made a mistake in the order.

In one corner, they noticed a table of rocket engineers, Pridonians wearing space coveralls. They were small, none over five foot tall, purple-skinned humanoids, from a heavy gravity star system. With all of the rocket ships arriving daily, it wasn't surprising to see the Pridonians here, as they were good space sailors, and worked well in zero gravity.

What was surprising, were the Tymanian gypsies that were circulating through the airport and restaurant, attempting to scam other races into helping pay for their further journey to some mythical promised land they had read about in the scriptures of their forefathers. They were thin, with four arms, and taller than most humans.

They only saw one Fadashka on the airport, and he was a pale yellow, with a metallic sheen, and large eyes that appeared to take in everything around it. The Fadashkas was asexual, reproducing without a mate, so they were often spotted alone.

Nor did they see any Jareens. And Steve

was thankful that the only Taegu-ma on the airport at the time was a cook in the kitchen. Too many times, the Taegu-mas can't put up with their own kind. Warriors are ready to fight, and their fights usually end in the death of one or both combatants.

As it was, Mal-Tellern was one Taegu-ma too many. While the rest of Cap Danger's team ordered well-cooked steaks from their home worlds, Mal-Tellern ordered something that was still alive, and he delighted in playing with the thing until his hunger got the best of him, and he killed it with a savage bite to the neck. Even the Jaspa female gave him an ugly stare. Thankfully, Steve noted that Carbi Panta's raw fish was already dead.

After leaving the restaurant, the men and women separated, and each went to bathrooms that accommodated their kind.

Steve, Tony and Johnny DeiToro were the first ones to come out, and they waited patiently for the others. Captain Van Goth and Lieutenant Mal-Tellern were next, and then they saw Carbi Panta and Cathy Rogers coming from powdering their noses.

Cathy Rogers was smiling, as she said, "She thought she was home in therel. Could we leave her here, and pick her up on the way back, maybe?"

"You're kind of rough on her, aren't you, Cathy?" Steve sighed.

"Where's the other young girl?" Tony asked, suddenly.

Cathy Rogers handed Steve a slip of paper, saying, "She asked me to give you this, Captain, before she left!"

"Damn!" Steve said, after he perused the slip of paper, then he slipped it into his pocket, and said, "Let's go!"

"What did it say, Steve?" Tony wanted to know.

Cathy Rogers shook her head, "I read it only after she left. I was too late to stop her. It seems that her name was Tanya Fels. You

don't think maybe she poisoned the captain, do you?"

"What?" Captain DeToro screamed. "Was that The Black Leopard? Did she poison your food, Captain Danger?"

"That's who she said she was," Steve admitted, "and she did say something about poisoning my food. But I think she was bluffing!"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," laughed Mal-Tellern.

"You were that close to her, and didn't know it," Tony said, amazed.

"None of us recognized her, dammit, now forget it, we have business to take care of!"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," laughed Mal-Tellern.

Finding the Bureau of Mines wasn't as easy task, as there appeared to be a dozen different bureaus in the Department of Mines at the Airport. Each department handling a particular area of the mines, from labor to shortages, accidents, safety, and even one dealing with murders and other criminal activity.

Finally, after finding out which department they needed to see, they then had to find that department, and that's where the maze came in; the Department of Mines was built like a maze, or as Mal-Tellern pointed out, "like a drunken Pridomian sailor laying out a city's streets!"

After wandering around the maze for the better part of a Zanthodon hour, they eventually came to a door marked, Department of Extreme Violence, and knocked loudly. At first, there was no answer.

"Probably gone fishing," joked Tony Duprey.

"For cats, maybe?" Captain DeToro questioned.

"You did that on purpose, DeToro!" Steve argued.

Johnny DeToro looked at Steve innocently.

The door came open slowly, and they found a Giacodon male reptile standing there.

Steve mistook him for the creature he had struck when first stepping into the lounge of the

airport, and was preparing to swing another uppercut at the lizard man's unprotected jaw, when Tony stopped him just in time.

"May I help you gentlemen?" the Giacodon asked.

Dusting his hands, Cap Danger stepped into the room before the Giacodon could close the portal.

"I'm Captain Steve Danger, of the Space Rangers, and this is my team of fighting men. We are here to investigate the murders at one of your mines, the Valdez!"

"And the young females with you, Ranger, are they part of your fighting team?" the Giacodon asked, suspicion in his three reptilian eyes.

"Actually, they are," Steve admitted. "Unfortunately, there is some kind of mating virus being spread around the galaxy, and I'm afraid one of the girls caught the disease."

"Oh, I see," the Giacodon said, concern in his eyes now for the fate of the young woman at Danger's side. "I do hope they get over the virus."

Tony Duprey couldn't control his laughter.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," Mal-Tellern laughed.

"Good heavens, have they got something too?" The Giacodon asked.

"If they don't, they're going to have something when I get through with them," Steve threatened. "Now, about these murders?"

"Come here, young human, and look at this map behind my desk."

Pointing to the map, the reptilian indicated an area about fifty miles from the city and airport. "One of our most distant mines at present, though others are contemplated for much farther later. This is the Valdez mine, due east of here. I'll write down your compass headings, so you won't get off course, but in case you do, just follow

the tracks that will lead you directly to the mines. In fact, if you will keep them in your sight, you will be better off.

"The foreman is named Cal Thomas, a human like yourself. I'll call him by radio and let him know to expect you. In the mean time, I'll inform the owner that you men have arrived."

Nodding, Steve motioned for his team to follow him outside, after thanking the official of the bureau of Department of Extreme Violence.

raped by the big machinery. But his job here wasn't as a conservationist, but to find and arrest a murderer.

Before they reached the mines, a blaster shot flashed across their bow, barely missing his wingmen. Before a second blast zeroed in on the flight of Rangers, Steve pointed downward with one outstretched arm, and then the seven members descended to the ground before they were shot out of the air by blasters.

"Did anyone see where that blaster shot came from?" Steve asked.

"I think it came from over in that direction," Tony Duprey pointed to their southeast.

"I think you're right, Tony," Cap Danger agreed, "see that cluster of rocks to the southeast of us? With all of this flat land, they've pretty well got us cut off from the mines. If we move, we're dead. We can't even fly out of here when it turns dark. They'll spot the flames from the rocket packs and pick us off."

"Could we muzzle the rockets somehow?" Johnny DelToro wanted to know.

"We don't have anything to muzzle them with," Danger told him.

There was a sudden blast from another ray gun, but it was yards off. Then a second blast, this time closer.

"They're trying to figure out where we are," Tony said.

"Yeah," Steve agreed, they know about where we are, but not exactly. Still, that's pretty good figuring, if you ask me."

"They probably had a scope on us when we went down," Johnny DelToro said.

"Without a doubt," Danger agreed.

Lieutenant Mai-Tellern suddenly started clacking in his own language, which their translators quickly repeated as, "Cowards! I'll attack them and kill everyone of the McGarion slime balls!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Ambush

With the coordinates to the Valdez Mines, Cap Danger's team strapped their rocket packs on their backs, and when they were safely outside the main airport terminal, they turned the rockets on and blasted into the air. With oxygen already in the atmosphere, all they needed were their Ranger hats to protect them from the wind as they shot through the air. Even Carbi Panta, the Jaspa female was enjoying the rocket flight, and her mind was temporarily off Steve Danger as she experienced a new thrill. However, to his chagrin, he noticed that Cathy Rogers was still close to his side, evidently to protect him from the cat woman, while the other team members kept a safe distance from each other to avoid one blaster shot getting them all.

Steve kept above the rail car tracks that led from the Valdez Mines to the airport, and back again, and saw that there was a steady stream of ore cars carrying heavy loads to be transported to buyers in the far-flung galaxies.

Although Vagadiaga was a new world in the system, it was fast being depleted of its natural ores. Captain Danger wasn't a geologist, but he figured Vagadiaga would be played out within the next two hundred years at the rate its minerals were being exported, and the land

"I've never seen a MGaron slime ball, Mal-Tellern, but you have the right idea," Steve told him. "However, I would suggest that we wait until dark, and leave a couple blasters with Captain Van Goth and the girls, while us men head for that clump of rocks. Whoever is out there may not expect an attack if they are receiving fire from this position."

A sudden hiss from Carbi Panta pulled all eyes toward the cat woman, who slashed the air with her claws: "Jaspas are all warriors, we wait nowhere while others do our battles!"

There was a snarl from Cathy Rogers, and she said, "Cats aren't the only female warriors in this team, Captain. Don't forget, I'm trained in every field that you were trained in, and I can kill also."

"You're right Cathy. You, too, Carbi Panta," Steve said. "I think Captain Van Goth can pretend to be all of us, while the six of us sneak up on the enemy and attack from two sides.

"I guess we might as well let them know where we are, so every so often someone fire a blaster towards those rocks, and keep them occupied till night. We attack at dark!"

They had several hours to wait till darkness, and sometimes the enemy blasters came awfully close to them. The team had spread out some distance from each other, except for Danger and the two women, who wouldn't leave his side. However, they dug depressions in the soft sand for their bodies to lie below the surface, and piled sand at their head, hoping it would reflect some of the blast should a shot come that close. It was the best defense they had, which was still almost nothing. But a Space Ranger was taught how to survive in their training, and the enemy had long ago learned that it was hard to kill a Ranger!

As darkness descended on Vagadiaga, the team members were shocked to see the twin moons, Virgil and Gomez rise above the horizon, reflecting the sun's mighty rays, and the sand lit up like a well-lighted stadium for nightly space

ball among the aliens on the home world. Fortunately, the moons were on a trajectory that took them only along the edge of the horizon for a short ways, and then they dipped back below the horizon disappearing from sight, this time leaving the land in total darkness, except for some starlight.

"Well, before the moons decide to sneak back above the horizon, I think we had better hightail it for that clump of rocks, and get this fight over with.

"We Protect!" Steve saluted his team.

"We Protect!" echoed his team members, except for Carbi Panta and Cathy Rogers, both of whom were still staying close to Steve.

"Purrr," Carbi Panta said.

"Captain, is it true that they purr even louder when you rub their bellies?" Cathy Rogers asked.

"Oh, shut up, Lieutenant," Steve ordered. "Do all of you think this is some kind of joke?"

"Not us," Tony Duprey said.

"No, no," said Captain DelToro.

"Cluck, duck, cluck," continued Mal-Tellern.

"See," said Cathy Rogers, "we don't think it's a joke."

"What's the use?" Steve sighed.

"Let's go, Rangers," Steve said, and the team disappeared into the surrounding darkness, Steve, Carbi Panta and Cathy Rogers to the north, Mal-Tellern, Duprey, and Johnny DelToro to the south.

They had to keep a good distance from each other, as right down the middle Captain Van Goth was firing two blasters every few minutes. The rays served two purposes. First, they kept the enemy ducking their heads, and second, the Rangers could guide their steps by the direction of the rays. Other than the occasional return blast, all was quiet in the surrounding desert, except for the light steps

of the six members rushing towards the enemy's stronghold.

It took a while to cross the desert to the outcropping of rock, but the Space Rangers were in excellent physical condition, and an easy jog ate up the distance in no time.

Once they did reach the cluster of rock, though, they moved on silent feet, and hoped not to disturb any loose rocks that might rattle and crack against more rocks, alerting the enemy to their presence. Steve noticed that Carbi Panta moved among the rocks like a cat, barely stepping on the surface of the rock bed. She was on all fours, moving in the attack mode. To his dismay, poor Cathy Rogers was trying to imitate the Jaspa female, and he almost laughed at the ludicrousness of it. "Damn," he thought in his mind, "I hope I don't have to release her from duty for treatment after this episode!"

He also noticed that the Taegu-ma, Mal-Tellern was moving like an attack mantis, and he was poised and deadly in form. Tony Duprey, Johnny DelToro, and he were all holding their blasters ready for use at the first sign of the enemy.

Thankfully, a sudden blast from a ray gun in the thick rock cluster nearby warned them that they were close by the enemy. Carbi Panta and Mal-Tellern could not be held back, as they silently rushed like invisible creatures among the rock ambushers. The enemy didn't know anyone was near them, until they were suddenly attacked by vicious killing machines. Carbi Panta, with her slashing claws was dismembering the enemy she had found, and Mal-Tellern had reached out suddenly with his long arms and grabbed one of the ambishers, and brought it to his sharp teeth, where he bit down on it, and then he tossed the thing aside and drew his blaster and shot it with a deadly ray.

More of the ambishers were coming out of concealment now that they knew the enemy was on their doorsteps, and blasts from their ray guns were sheering into the sides of the very

rock walls that had protected them before. Steve, Tony and Johnny DelToro let loose with their own blasters, knocking the shadowy ambishers down like toy spacers in a children's game of Conquer the Universe.

Soon, there was no more resistance, and the Space Rangers approached the ambishers and shined lights down on the bodies.

"What the hell are they?" Tony Duprey asked.

"My guess would be renegade Robots of Deben Four," Cap Danger said in awe.

"They are not yet members of the Galactic Empire, but they have applied to become partners in the Alliance, and they do have a Diplomatic Mission stationed on Zanthodon," he continued, "but these may have been old-time renegades that distrust man. You see, they were once robotic slaves. Today, they are building new generations of their species, without difference in sex, yet some of these still have resemblance to men and women."

"Yeah," Tony said, "the shadow we saw in the scenes at the mines looked like a woman's profile."

"At least something with breasts," corrected Captain Danger. "I would say we are looking at the murderers of those miners."

"How did they know we were coming?" Captain DelToro asked suddenly.

"I think I know the answer to that," Steve said, "but let's see if any of these renegades still have life in them."

"I think your cat woman was still playing with one that seemed to be alive, Steve," Captain DelToro said, pointing to the Jaspa female who was still playing with the head of the robot like a cat with a mouse.

When Steve went over to it, the voice box was fading out, but he bent down and listened closely to the creature's last words, before it finally ceased to exist.

Taking his blaster out of its holster again, Steve flashed a message into the sky that Captain Van Goth would see, and understand that the enemy had been defeated. It was imperative that no more deadly blast came from his ray guns, or his own team would be in the line of fire this time.

"What did you find out, Steve?" Captain Johnny DelToro asked.

"I'll explain when we reach the mines, Captain," Steve delayed his report for the time being.

They had worn their rocket packs across the desert to attack the enemy, so now they awaited the arrival of Captain Van Goth. When he finally landed, his rocket pack blazing, Steve said: "We might as well continue our flight to the Valdez Mines. I don't think we will meet any resistance tonight. However, it might be a different story in the morning. The quicker we reach the mines, the sooner the chief mastermind will be under arrest, and we will be able to return to our ships."

Later that night, the Space Rangers landed at the mines, where the night shift workers were loading rail cars with ore to be transported to the airport. The workers appeared surprised when the Rangers dropped in on them in the dead of night. But when they saw the uniforms of the Space Rangers, they lost their fear immediately.

Approaching one of the workers, Captain Dander held a private conversation with the man for several minutes. Finally, the mine employee dropped what he was doing and rushed off to one of the modules parked at the side of the mine.

Steve motioned for his fellow Rangers to get out of sight, and they waited until a man stuck his head out of the module to ask who was pounding on his door at such an ungodly hour. The mine employee whispered something to him, and then turned and hurried back to his place beside the rail car. A few minutes later, the man

from the module came out the door and headed for the mine.

Reaching the miners, he asked in a belligerent tone, "Who has had an accident? Where are they?"

Stepping from concealment, Captain Steve Danger approached the man. "Your renegade slaves have been destroyed, Cal Thomas. They met with an accident about ten miles from here. They will not be carrying out any more of your murderous orders.

"I arrest you in the name of the Galactic Empire, under the authority of the Galactic Alliance, as ordained by the commander of the Space Rangers.

"My team will fly you into Callisto, where you will be turned over to the Department of Judicial Punishment, where a sentence will be handed down in your case for crimes against man. Whatever happens to you is none of my affair, but your attempt to jump this claim with renegade robots will most likely result in your death or imprisonment. Once you are handed over to the proper authorities, the involvement of the Space Rangers will end."

"Lieutenant Mal-Tellern, you are probably the strongest one of us, so I think you should carry our prisoner back to the airport.

"We Protect!" Steve saluted.

"We Protect!" was chorused by the other Rangers.

The flight back to Callisto was without incident. Mal-Tellern carried the prisoner in his long arms. Steve watched him out of the corner of his eyes, and was sure that the Taegu-ma was playing with the prisoner like a piece of meat, pretending he was going to drop him to the ground far below. The man had a look of fear in his eyes until they landed in Callisto, and the Space Rangers turned him over to the Department of Judicial Punishment.

As they were heading back for their ships, Captain Johnny Deltoro, said: "Okay, Steve, just how did you know it was Cal Thomas, and what is the rest of the story?"

"That was the easy part," Cap Danger began. "First off, if you will recall, our friend at the Department of Extreme Violence said that he would notify Cal Thomas that we were coming, so only three people besides us should have known that. The official we spoke to, Cal Thomas, and the owner of the mine in Callisto. I never once suspected the official or the mine owner, although the official did remind me of the character I fought when we first set foot on the airport.

"And then the dying robot from Beden Four told me before it passed on, that Thomas had brought them — the renegades — to Vagadiaga as workers in the mines, but really used them as his personal slaves. That should be public records, at least if he brought them here legally.

"I think that further investigation will disclose that Thomas is a collector of ancient guns, and had his robot slaves use them to kill some of the miners, and frighten others."

"When will they ever learn?" Tony asked.

"When will they ever learn that they can't beat me?" Steve asked Tony.

"No, Steve, I was wondering when would the criminals ever learn that they can't beat the Rangers!"

"Oh!" Steve laughed.

Back in Null-Space, Silver Raptors #2 & 3 were once again hidden from eyesight, as a lone Silver Raptor #1 made its way back towards the Crescent Moon. Steve was fighting off the Jaspa cat woman, while his copilot, Cathy Rogers, was sitting at the ship's controls, when the radio crackled to life. He recognized the sexy voice immediately, as did Carbi Panta and Cathy Rogers.

"Well, well, if it isn't my dinner date from Vagadiaga. I forgot to thank you for that lovely

meal, Steve, darling. We must do it again sometime, but please, leave those other women behind next time."

"Hello, Tanya. You were impolite the last time," Steve said. "First, you failed to introduce yourself. I prefer to know who all my dinner dates are! And second, you left so abruptly, without saying goodbye. I do think you owe me a personal apology. How about joining me in my little rocket ship. We could discuss your bad manners, among other things?"

Laughing, Tanya said, "I do believe I hear that crazy Jaspa female standing there. I bet that she and your copilot are right beside you as we speak, am I correct?"

"Yes, but we could ignore them if you were here, Tanya. Just the four of us!"

Laughing, Tanya said, "You better count again, I see the two Silver Raptors hiding in the darkness out there. I still need to rebuild my fleet after our last encounter, darling. Maybe I'll let you buy me dinner again, though."

"I'll recognize you the next time, sweetheart," Steve chuckled.

"I'm not so sure about that, darling. Don't be too positive that what you saw on Vagadiaga was what I really look like."

"So long, Steve, darling!" and the radio went dead.

Then Tony's voice came over the Null-radio, "So long, Steve, darling, kiss, kiss, kiss!"

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," laughed Mal-Tellern.

"Won't this ever end?" Steve groaned, holding his head in his hands.

"If it doesn't, I'll shoot you all," Cathy Rogers said, "and fly this ship by myself!"

"And I bet you could, at that, partner," Steve laughed.

A week later, the mission was over, and the Silver Raptors were back in the Crescent Moon, where everyone was putting on their

dress blues for the coming ceremonies. Carbi Panta had caught a flight back to her home planet, and Cap Danger was catching up on some well-needed rest while he waited for the gathering that afternoon. These little award ceremonies were always a delight, and he never missed one, if he could help it.

Looking at his watch, he noticed that the time was fast approaching, so he started walking towards the ceremonial platform.

The ceremonial stadium on the Crescent Moon began to fill up as those who could attend began assembling on both sides of the huge auditorium. Those closest to the stage were Commander Perry and his Space Patrol. Standing next to the commander were Captain Steve Danger and his copilot, Lieutenant, Cathy Rogers. Standing on the walkway itself, higher than the level for those viewing the ceremony, were Captain Van Goth and his copilot, Lieutenant Mal-Tellern.

Once everyone was in place, Commander Perry walked to the stairs that led up to the walkway, and stepped regally upwards until he stood beside his Rangers. Speaking through an electronic microphone, he addressed the crowd as they became silent.

"Here on the Crescent Moon, we are gathered to honor two of our brave warriors, and bestow upon them the medals for their bravery.

"Standing before you are Captain Van Goth, of the Jareen race, and Lieutenant Mal-Tellern of the Taegu-ma; two warriors of different races, who, a month ago, were called upon to defend a convoy of free people seeking refuge within the Galactic Empire.

"Before these freedom-seeking people could reach the safety of the Imperial Federation, their unarmed ships were attacked by marauding space pirates, led by the vicious Ghanghis Ren, commanding six ships of well-armed cutthroats.

"Making a run for safety, they radioed for help, and Silver Raptor #3 received that

emergency call and responded; as a fighting team, Lieutenant Mal-Tellern jockeyed his ship into attack status, while Captain Van Goth manned the ship's cannons, blasting the enemy ships into oblivion in a dogfight of one against nine. Our Rangers sent Ghanghis Ren screaming off to parts unknown, with his tail between his legs, as eight enemy ships flew their last interstellar flight.

"Today, those freedom-seeking people are safe under the umbrella of the Imperial Federation, while we honor the brave men who brought them safely through pirate territory, and into the safe arms of the Galactic Alliance.

"This walkway contains 136 steps, the exact number of our Rangers, and as I commit these brave men to you, I ask that each of you salute them as they take those 136 steps to the other end of this walkway.

"Gentlemen, today, the walkway belongs to you. Begin your walk!"

With that, Captain Van Goth and Lieutenant Mal-Tellern took the first of 136 steps to the end of the walkway. Captain Steve Danger and Lieutenant Cathy Rogers were the first to salute their brothers in arms. No one left the stadium until the walk was completed, and the two Rangers received their medals for bravery at the other end.

With the ceremony over, Steve and Cathy left for their ship. It was time for patrol duty.

"You've got to curb that jealousy of yours, Cathy," Steve told his copilot. "That Jaspa female could rip your metal body apart in seconds!"

"What are you talking about, Captain?" Cathy asked, a quizzical look on her face. "I could care less about your affairs. You human males must think us women have nothing more to worry about, than who - or what you are sleeping with from one day to the next! I was not one bit jealous of that Jaspa female."

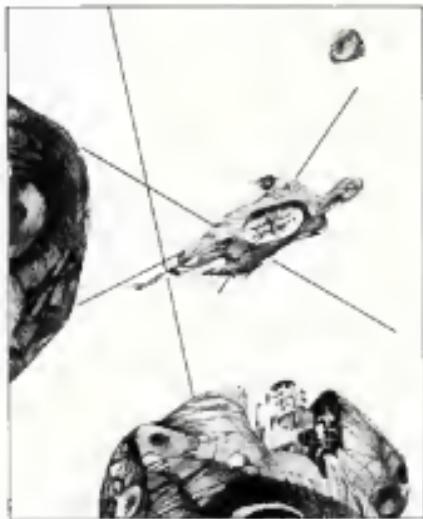
Whatever gave you such an idea?"

Slapping his partner on the back, Cap Danger roared with laughter.

THE END

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Omega Station Glossary

Omega Station aka The Rock: A port near the end of one spiral of our galaxy, highly important as a starting-point for intergalactic travel. Also, the asteroid/planetoid on which the port exists, considered to have been a viable planet at one time in its ancient history but now airless. There are, however, the scattered remnants of a molten core that back up the supposed past history; the Port draws much of its energy from this core, which also allows squatting/settling in numerous abandoned tunnels that honeycomb the entire planetoid (see The Depths).

Some inhabitants of Omega Station

Algensié: A renegade Vamir who is the friend, compatriot and partner of Malik Blayne.

Lieutenant Baramin: Fresh meat in the Coonies; he's young, eager and ready. Tall, thin, red-haired human, he's still got stars in his eyes about being a Connie.

Malik Blayne: A clone of Rudolf Dyll who escaped from the banned genetic research

facility with help from some shadowy forces that even he doesn't know about. He's taken the place of Dyll on the Rock, and is using the resultant power and money to make a difference — he hopes.

Crla Maragorn: A one-handed barmaid who works at Dhamu's Place. Her past is shrouded in mystery. She's a Halsan/Human mix with lavender eyes and hair; short, lean, strong, with a wicked sense of humor.

Dhamu: A Modajai who owns/runs Dhama's Place, a bar/restaurant on LevSix.

Rudof Dyll: Scion of the mega-rich Dyll family, he's been exiled to Omega Station aka The Rock, by his father...for reasons that will eventually become apparent.

Captain Carie Eversyn: Commanding officer on Omega Station, who's determined to stop the smuggling of the drug called strax...especially since he's discovered that several of his subordinates have become addicted to it.

Mirrow-Gung: a Bansniet merchant on LevSix with delusions of adequacy, who helps — and sometimes hinders — Malik Blayne.

A few of the species who inhabit the Rock

Bansniet: Averaging about a meter tall, a fur-covered species with pointed ears and a long tongue. Bansnits generally subsist on the bottom-most levels of any society, making their livings at trading.

Corilium: Six-legged insectoids with a bad attitude and the ability to back it up.

Human: Two legs, two arms, and occasionally brainless.

L'Taltons: A species with feathery crests and round, plump bodies; they are always in pairs of

males, females or neuters. Very highly technologically advanced, they offer their services to the highest bidder.

Vamir: Four-armed, fur-covered species known for their loyalty and short tempers.

Places to visit — or avoid

Starview Restaurant: The most select, expensive and exclusive restaurant on Omega Station.

Depths, the: Anything/everything below LevSix on Omega Station. Lawless, dangerous and wild; anything and everything can and does happen in the Depths.

Dome Seven: One of the seventeen major domes on the surface of Omega Station, not counting the technical/docking bays or the smaller domicile domes.

LevSix: The sixth level below the surface of Omega Station; the very beginning of the lawless sectors which become progressively worse and are known as the Depths.

The Dyll Dome: a large dome that belongs entirely to Rudof Dyll; contains his living quarters, his greenhouses, and plenty of room for guests and parties; also contains the body of Rudof Dyll himself, kept in stasis in a secret chamber beneath the dome.

Miscellaneous

Comsys: Communication systems(s).

Dondare Mark Five blaster: A seriously out-of-date weapon, common in the Depths, where there's an entire cottage industry that creates charges for it.

Boveen: A large, violent, incredibly stupid, multi-

antlered herbivore from the planet Ruffinose, raised mainly for food though they are often sent into fighting arenas against various carnivores.

Prod: A low-voltage electrical prod used in the 'herding' of the ka'frindi fungus which grows like a film atop the sludge in the sewage tanks.

Prong: A fork.

Vold: An insult referring to the space between a human's ears (or relative spots in other species) being empty; i.e., calling someone too stupid to live.

Consolidated Guard aka Connies: The military/police force of the Malpairiso Sector, who are now in control of Omega Station.

Inversodynamics: A company that controls eighty-four inhabited planets in various sectors.

Red Publicans: A militant religious group that believes travel to other galaxies is a sin; they once controlled Omega Station in order to stop inter-galactic travel.

Ka' frindi: A fungus that grows on sewage in only one place in the galaxy — in the reclamation plants on Omega Station. Valuable as an export, due to its flavor-enhancing qualities, it is also used, during its tertiary cycle, in the creation of straz.

Straz: A highly addictive drug created during the tertiary life cycle of the ka'frindi fungus. Its main effect is a sense of enormous well-being and the feeling that nothing is impossible ... followed by the 'crash' which sends the addict in the other direction and creates a fierce desire for more straz. The addictive qualities of the drug, coupled with its high cost, almost always leads to a life of crime to support the addiction. The Rock's primary export.

Straz-head, strazzle: A straz addict.



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ON OMEGA STATION: The Ballad of Malik Blayne by K. G. McAbee

Part One: UNDERWORLD

"Captain, Sir!" All present and accounted for, Sir?"

Captain Eversyn winced at the shout, then nodded at Baranin; the young lieutenant was so eager he seemed to be vibrating. Eversyn cast a critical eye over the squad of ten that blocked the corridor, all seasoned Connies looking calm, uninterested and assured, then nodded again. He hoped Baranin wouldn't burst in excitement, but it made Eversyn uncomfortable to see how tightly the boy's hand was wrapped around his blaster.

No one on the Rock was supposed to be armed, nobody but the Guard, though that concept had proved more than a farce in the past.

"Good. Inside, triple time. Secure the exits, locate the quarry, surround and stand to until further orders."

"Sir!"

The squad entered the Starview Lounge and followed orders; Eversyn watched them from a strategic position near the main entrance. Quick, smooth, efficient, just as the Consolidated Guard did everything; even Baranin managed to contain his excitement and not shoot anyone. But it was totally useless, since it was obvious that their quarry wasn't there.

Warnings had reached the wrong ears. Not surprising. It was well nigh impossible to

keep anything secret on Omega Station — aka The Rock — with its endless warrens and tunnels curving back on each other. The high beryllium content of the planetoid itself prevented most scanners from working more than a few meters below the surface, so it had never been efficiently mapped. That's why he'd decided to take the bovine by the antlers and simply show up at the Starview Lounge with a heavily armed squad, hoping Malik Blayne would be there, as per information received.

No luck.

Still, Eversyn never expected to be invited to stay for dinner.

* * * *

"So, Captain," Rudof Dyll asked, his voice a smooth tenor, the series of silver rings that lined both his earlobes twinkling in the subdued light, "what do you think of our little lounge? Not bad? A bit gaudy, perhaps?" A slender hand, bejeweled to the first knuckle on all fingers, wafted towards the dance floor several meters below, where a number of couples — or in some cases, threesomes or foursomes — were moving in varying degrees of attention and rhythm to soft music. Some few meters below, because Rudof Dyll's table was perched atop one of the several floating balconies that drifted in carefully coordinated random patterns above the floor level of the lounge — now skimming above the dancers' heads, now approaching the transparent dome that protected them from the near total vacuum without, a vacuum that made the stars bright burning lights in the onyx sky.

Captain Eversyn was not happy. Not happy at all. Actually, if pressed, he would admit — but not to anyone else, only to himself, of course, and that in the dark and silence and loneliness of his private domicile — that he was really happy nowhere but

behind a desk, bringing order to the chaos of reports and information, then storing that order all neatly away in clearly labeled and docketed files. It was his most secret, secret vice, and it would never do to allow anyone else to know that about him. Being the tall, massive, heavily muscled captain in the Consolidated Guard that he was, everyone took him to be ready at any time with fists or weapons to bring, if not peace, at least some sort of armed détente to any difficult situation.

But Carle Eversyn preferred to deal with paperwork. It was his curse. It was also, though he'd never realized it, his blessing, the means to his constant promotion, and the real reason he'd been assigned to so many difficult and dangerous situations. He had teams of eager fire-eaters under his command, Baranin and others, armed and dangerous Connies who would be happy, with any weapon at hand or bare fists, to break heads — or related organs in non-Human species — whenever necessary to restore the status quo.

But how many of them could write up a concise report, evaluate details, or make deductions from the sometimes sparse information on hand?

Still, the Starview was out of his ordinary haunts. And Rudof Dyll was certainly like no one he'd ever met, in any star system — or nearly out of one, as the rock beneath their feet most certainly was.

The Starview was the most expensive restaurant and lounge on the Rock; no doubt the most expensive Eversyn had ever been in, as his humble upbringing on Garitus Minor Three had seldom provided more than access to the occasional tavern. Even after leaving GarThree as an excited recruit, and his continual rise through the Connie ranks with its concomitant visits to a multitude of planetary systems, he'd not often had the time — or the credz — to visit such places.

But his host certainly had the credz.

Sometimes it seemed like half of this damned putrid Rock belonged to Rudof Dyll... or at least, to the Dyll family. And the Dylls didn't mind shelling out some of their vast amounts of credz — more than he could imagine. Eversyn suspected — to keep Rudof in luxurious, extravagant, elegant, ostentatious, sumptuous... imprisonment here on Omega Station.

Captain Eversyn straightened in his lushly cushioned chair, glad that he'd been wearing a clean uniform. He'd have felt even more wildly out of place if he'd had to attend in his usual rumpled drab grey cover-up.

He was almost sure he'd lost control of the situation; it was important that he regain it. After all, he was in charge of Omega Station; he was the local commander of the Consolidated Guard. And this man lounging before him was completely under his command.

Then why was he so nervous?

He twisted uncomfortably in his seat. "Uh, this is certainly a very pleasant place, Mestre—"

"Oh, please, no ceremony. Do call me Rudof. Everyone does." Dyll smiled, his thin lips stretching but not opening; with their suspiciously sumptuous red color, the smile gave the appearance of a dagger slash across his pale, narrow face.

Rudof Dyll was dressed in tight yellow breeches tucked into soft, low boots; a frilled, full sleeved shirt of a darker yellow, almost gold, and a vest heavy with embroidery and sparkling with jewels. The yellow-gold tones set off his hair, a deep coppery red, which was scraped back from his long face and imprisoned in a gold clasp, also sprinkled with jewels. His eyes, set behind long, long lashes with tiny jewels on the tips, were a bright green. Rings on his fingers; rings in his ears; one in his right nostril.

Eversyn, without realizing it, sniffed in

disapproval. "Very well, then... Rudof. This is a pleasant place to, uh, relax. But I'm at a bit of a loss. Why did you ask me to dine with you? We Connies are seldom asked to social events—especially when we've just searched the place, looking for a known fugitive."

Rudof Dyll's companion said, "Throob," in a deep, reverberating growl that shook the glasses on the table.

"Indeed, I couldn't have put it better myself, dear old thing." Rudof nodded at the Vamir, who sat on his left side and Eversyn's right at the table for four. "In case you don't understand Vamiri, Captain, Algensio just pointed out that I asked you to dine with us for no other reason than the pleasure of your company."

Eversyn eyed the two meter tall Vamir. He — She? Eversyn didn't know much about the species, and decided to let the first gender choice stand until he had more information — he was covered in short dense fur, dark brown with pale streaks that ran up all four of his burly arms, circled his broad chest, and disappeared over his shoulders to run in streaks down his back. No clothing, but a wide belt around his thick middle, just below his second set of arms.

Eversyn wasn't sure, but he suspected that the small whitish things that hung from silver hooks on the belt might be bones... or teeth.

"Ah." He nodded at the Vamir. "Uh, thank you... both."

"Not at all, Captain, not at all. I always enjoy seeing new faces, making fresh acquaintances, and dear Algensio is simply a social flutterby. Not to mention the excitement your little action just created for us! A search, for a dangerous criminal I have no doubt. How positively thrilling."

Dyll raised one eyebrow and leaned forward; a waft of scent — expensive, Eversyn knew — enveloped the table and its environs.

"And let us be totally honest, as among friends: our scene is just the least bit limited

here on the Rock, as I'm sure has not escaped your attention."

"And you don't get off-station much, I believe?" There, thought Eversyn; see what he makes of that little remark. Eversyn knew for a fact that Rudof hadn't left the Rock in more than ten sibinz. That equated to six turnovers in control of the shipping lanes here on the very edge of the galaxy, six counting the coup that had placed the captain in charge less than four standard quintinz earlier.

Six turnovers in government on the Rock; but the Dylls were still the richest family in the galaxy.

"Sadly, no, Captain. I do not. I spend most of my time tending my flowers in my domicile dome. I have quite the collection in my hydroponics sphere; you must come see them. Of course, being so lonely, it makes it all the luckier for me that Omega Station has had such a wide and varied selection of... overseers in the past cyks, yes? It at least gives me the opportunity to share the occasional meal with so discerning a gentle as yourself. Here, let me help you to some of this ka'frindi. It's one of the things our little home is famous for, as I'm sure you know." Rudof leaned over the table, picked up a spoon, scooped a greenish blue glob from a small crystal bowl, and plopped it atop the slice of bovine steak on Eversyn's plate.

Eversyn watched in ill-concealed horror as the blue-green goop began to move, spreading over the steak and sinking clearly visible feelers into it.

"You must wait until it gets settled, you know." Rudof smiled. "It releases flavor enhancers and endorphins, but of course you have to eat it before it ends its life cycle — while it's still green, in other words. If you wait until it turns brown, it could make you quite ill."

Eversyn swallowed through a throat gone suddenly dry. He knew about ka'frindi, of

course; it was the Rock's major export — the Rock's only export, officially, at least. But he certainly had no desire to put that crawling green stuff in his mouth. Then he remembered who his host was, and picked up his knife and prong with a sigh, sawed off a small bit of the bovine steak, lifted it to his mouth, and forced it inside. He chewed slowly, surprised at the rich taste but not much relishing how the fungus — Lichen? Bacteria? — tried to escape from his grinding teeth.

"Very... good," he said at last, after he'd swallowed and sipped his wine.

"I'm so glad you like it. It's an acquired taste, I must admit, but quite popular on some worlds. The fungus grows on the lower levels here, as of course you know — and, so I understand, nowhere else in the galaxy. I won't mention what it grows on." Dyll smirked nastily.

"So, Captain, I suppose you have no intention of discussing who you were looking for just now. Secret Guard business and all that. But perhaps you can tell me this: what are the Consolidated Guards' plans for Omega Station?"

"Plans, Master — Rudof?" Eversyn coughed. "We're here to keep the peace, of course, and to make sure that the trade routes stay open."

"Of course. We mustn't let the routes close, if for no other reason than to keep my dearest papa happy — and the rest of my family terribly rich. But to be totally honest, Captain, those were the plans for the last, what was it, six or eight new controllers of the Rock? I had hoped yours would be different."

"Throob," commented Algenso around a mouthful of green salad; it was dripping with a red dressing that looked to Everson uncomfortably like blood.

"Yes, you're right, dear fellow," Rudof agreed. "We'd somehow expected more from the Consolidated Guard of Malpairiso Sector, hadn't we? More, at least, than we've gotten from the Red Publicans, or Inversodynamics, or... well, in

short, from any of the groups who've — let's be dramatic — seized power here on the Rock in the last few sinterz." Dyll gave a theatrical shudder.

Captain Eversyn tried to slide his chair a bit further away from the Vamir, who chose that moment to grin at him, baring a double row of pointed teeth liberally coated with green and red bits.

"Yes, well, uh... I'm sorry you're disappointed, ah, Rudof. But after all, you're hardly in a position to complain, are you? In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, you and everyone else on the Rock are under my command. My command, backed up, if you don't mind my mentioning it, by my extremely well-armed soldiers."

"Yes," murmured Rudof Dyll, offering another slash of a smile. "That's too true. It's a pity, that. Complaints are useless, yes. Not to mention, you're doing such a good job at... controlling the Rock, too."

Eversyn felt his face going red. "If you mean the smuggling, that's very nearly under control. And the Depths, well, they're just a matter of time."

"The Depths, Captain?" Slash smile. "A matter of time, do you say? The Depths have beaten better men than you, for all your extremely well-armed Connies behind you. Think of it, Captain." Dyll leaned forward, holding up a bejeweled finger as he made each point. "One: an endless series of corridors, tunnels and caverns, dug from the solid rock that composes our homey little planetoid. Two: groups of settlers, squatters, the lost and the discarded, tribes of children, hermits, any species you might name and some you cannot, all thronging there in the dank dimness."

The captain opened his mouth, but Dyll continued, not allowing him to speak. "Three: the asteroid belt that surrounds our little home, the ice miners, the smugglers, the

pirates. Four: the countless unknown entrances to the Depths, impossible to find, much less police. Can one man, however many soldiers he has at his back, make even a dent in those problems? I think not, Captain. I think not."

The captain decided to ignore that last statement. "Just because these... barbers have defeated previous controllers doesn't mean that they're unsolvable, Mestre Dyll."

"Throob," agreed — disagreed? — the Vamir.

"Yes, Captain, you speak the true, of course. But these latest little... incidents? That rather nasty explosion at Dock Thirteen? What was the loss there? All those other explosions? And the way those insurgents keep taking over the comsys, sending out those dreadfully unpleasant rants about your own Consolidated Guard, those vociferous complaints about Malpairiso Sector. And after all, you can't even find that pirate or whatever he calls himself, Malik Blayne, can you? Worrying, Captain, for a peaceful, quiet gentle such as myself, I must say. Very worrying indeed."

Eversyn sighed; he could see it was going to be a very long meal.

* * * * *

Rudof Dyll strolled along the wide central corridor towards the connecting airlock leading to the surface and his domicile, the Dyll Dome. The Vamir Algensio stalked by his side.

This was a merchant corridor; upscale, of course, as it was on the actual surface of the planetoid that was home to — that actually was, in fact — Omega Station. Clothing, jewels, rare imported food and drink, slaves, bed partners to whet the tastes of the most jaded customers; all these and more were just a few of the items for sale.

Rudof yawned at importunate purveyors who tried to capture his attention, unless the item in question caught his attention, as did a

string of seven small slave boys matched in height and coloring.

"Yes, yes," he said, cutting short the slaver's description, "but they'll grow at different rates, won't they?"

"Oh, indeed no, honored Mestre," the slaver protested. "They've been carefully selected, and genetically indoctrinated, naturally."

"Naturally," Rudof said, eyeing the boys again; one, the one on the left, had a bruise across his bony ribs and traces of dried tears on his peaked face. "Well, clean them up and send them along; they'll be rather pretty working in my conservatory."

"Oh, certainly, Honored Citizen; very pretty indeed... working in your conservatory."

The slaver winked one of his three eyes knowingly and turned away, delightedly calculating his percentage of the sale price.

"Throob," Algensio said thoughtfully as they left the slaver.

"Yes, you're right, of course," Rudof replied absently. "More trouble than they're worth, probably. But what else could I do?"

"Throob," Algensio agreed with a sigh and a shake of his furry head. A wide red tongue rolled out and licked away a few remaining traces of dinner from his chin. Cutting their way past the rest of the stalls, they reached the edge of Dome Seven and the ground-shuttle airlock.

"Dyll Dome," Rudof said, waving a jeweled hand. The lock-keeper nodded eagerly and escorted them through the heavy doors. He ushered them into the shuttle and set the coordinates for them before returning to the corridor, eyeing the huge tip in his hand with satisfaction.

A whirr, a click, and the tiny shuttle sped across its preprogrammed path towards a small pearlescent dome that glistened in the black distance.

The shuttle's path was a twisting one.

The surface of Omega Station at first glance resembled nothing more than tumbled piles of boulders, some heaped far higher than the huge domes that dotted its surface. But on closer inspection, dear places were hidden amongst the rocks, of sizes varying from a few meters square to large enough for the placement of sizable domes. In the near distance, but crisp and clear through the vacuum, loomed the huge structures of the official docking platforms and trading stations that were the reason for the Rock's existence.

The shuttle beeped twice, gave a last right angle turn, and slowed slightly as its onboard navicompr re-checked the position programmed by the lock-keeper. A few seconds later, it snicked home in one of the Dyll Dome's personnel airlocks.

"Home at last," Rudof Dyll sighed as he unknit his lanky form from the uncomfortable seat and waved Algensio through the airlock ahead of him, pausing to hit the return button on the navicompr. The shuttle beeped twice politely, and as soon as the inside dome door closed, disengaged and sped back towards Dome Seven. Algensio stretched all four arms and opened his mouth in a wide yawn.

"Yes, do hibernate a while, dear fellow," Rudof agreed. "I've got to go out again, I'm afraid."

"Throat?"

Rudof shrugged. "No, not as Rudof. Not tonight." He patted his huge companion on one arm. "Don't wait up."

* * * *

Rudof Dyll had stripped off his clothes and jewels as he walked across his bedroom, and now stood under a stinging needle-spray of hot water in a shower pod big enough for four. He squeezed a handful of soapsuds from a wall-mounted dispenser and scrubbed his face with both hands, then let the water wash away all

traces of makeup. He stepped away from the spray, bent over a basin set in the opposite wall, squirted out a handful of soapsuds from a different dispenser, and began washing his hair. The coppery red color slithered off and into the basin, which caught the organic dye for future use.

Rudof stepped out of the shower pod into a small anteroom that shot out jets of warm air to dry him. Then he stalked into his bedroom.

Naked, Rudof Dyll barely resembled what he thought of as his public image. Tall and lanky, lean but well-muscled, he carried himself straight, head high, and strode confidently around the room — instead of the strolling, slouching, lazy figure that had just left an impromptu dinner party at the Starview Lounge. There was a long laser burn stretching across his back, from the top of his right shoulder to his left hip, and thick white lesions encircled his wrists and ankles — manacle scars, and the kind that were not acquired in a day, but took years to develop.

His hair, with the dye washed out, was a dark nondescript brown liberally streaked with white. Brown too were the clothes he selected from a concealed closet set behind a high armoire. It looked too heavy to move — and was, unless you knew the secret catch that shifted it forward. He slid into a baggy brown jumpsuit with zippered pouches, much like the ones worn by freighter crewmembers, and slid his feet into battered boots.

Pausing before a mirror, he reached up and popped out his green contacts and peeled off the jewel-tipped lashes; brown eyes stared out of a narrow face.

Rudof Dyll regarded himself in the mirror, a smile on lips no longer a garish red.

"Goodbye, Mastre Dyll; hello, Malik Blayne." The smile twisted into a snarl.

The former Rudof, now Malik, scrambled in the secret closet and retrieved a

battered backpack. He hefted the pack as the armoire returned to its former position, then glanced around the room to make sure everything was secure.

The backpack was almost empty. He'd have to fill up on his way down.

Malik hit the palm-lock on his way out the door, strode down a hallway, took a right turn, a left, and stopped in the middle of a shorter hall.

Silence permeated the dome, but Malik hadn't got to his somewhat precarious position by taking chances. He tiptoed to the end of the hall, just to make sure that no one was waiting around the corner.

Clear.

It was always clear.

But he always checked.

Malik strode back to the center of the hall, reached up and laid his thumb against an almost undetectable indentation near the ceiling. A hatch slid open in the wall near the floor. Malik jerked his hand away, reached inside, scrambled for a bar set in the ceiling, and jumped into the hatch, feet first. It closed behind him with a soft *snkt*.

He kept his eyes shut as he slid several meters down the tube; he didn't like enclosed spaces. At last his boot soles hit an obstruction. He opened an eye — useless in the dense darkness — then fumbled for another indentation; in this one, he stuck his other thumb.

An opening beneath his feet — light billowed up around him — Malik slid out.

The room was low and irregular, carved from the very rock of the planetoid itself. There was the faint and ever pervasive odor of mold and fungus. Cases were stacked everywhere, labeled food, armory, ammo in seven languages and four glyphs.

Malik filled his pack with a selection of dried foods in polybdialloy packages, strapped a blaster to his thigh, then walked through the cave. After several twists and turns — the cave stretched for some distance and he descended towards the interior of the planetoid with each

step — Malik reached a clear area. No crates littered the floor, and here the construction had been done with more care. The walls were straight and true, and he could stand upright without the danger of hitting his head on a jagged protruding rock spike, and walk without dodging boulders. On the far side of the smaller cavern, a transparent cylindrical tube rested on three heavy supports, from the center of which came the constant hum of a life-stasis system.

Within the tube floated the long lean body of a naked man; his russet brown hair, liberally streaked with white, floated in an aurora around his head in the clear gel that surrounded him.

"Good evening, Rudof," said Malik as he checked the dials and filters. "I'm off on a visit to the underworld. I'll send everyone your love, shall I?"

The eyes of the floating figure blinked once, so slowly that Malik had disappeared before they'd made one full circuit.

* * * *

Malik Blayne stalked a long corridor haphazardly cut from the rock of the Rock. It crisscrossed, intersected, and connected to a multitude of other tunnels, corridors and passageways, some nearly empty, some teeming with all sorts of life; maintenance panels blocked with rusted grates peppered the walls, ceiling and floor. He took what looked to be random turns... but were not.

The combined smells of Humans, dirt, a multitude of other species, fungus, mold, garbage and the general funk of an area that had never seen a sun rose in a miasma so thick it was almost as if he had to cut his way through it. It'd been a while since he'd been down the Depths; he had always hoped the smell would become less noticeable as he got used to it, but it hadn't, not so far. He put up

with it, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

A turn; up ahead a busy intersection. Malik slowed, then slipped into a cross-passage, ducked behind a pair of LTaltons; their feathery crests and round, plump bodies effectively shielded him from view of anyone in the larger corridor he'd just left — especially the pair of patrolling Connies in their grey uniforms that he'd seen turn a corner and start his way.

Malik nodded at the LTaltons, who squawked a polite reply, and headed down a ramp that led from LevFive into the less crowded — and more dangerous — LevSix.

"Mal! My Human! Come in, take load off! Whatcha got for me this beautiful day?"

The shop was a hole gouged from rock on the broad Zeta Corridor of LevSix, sandwiched between an around-the chrono bar and an inter-species brothel. The proprietor was a shorter than usual — meaning he came barely to Mal's waist — ginger-furred Bansnict named Mrrow-Gung, who had delusions of being a five-star merchant even though his shop barely rated a quarter star on its best day.

Not that it ever had a best day, Malik thought as he looked at the sad collection of wares for sale. Hand tools, obviously not of the highest quality polybdalloy, since many were chipped and rusted from the everlasting humidity; MRIs, meals ready for ingestion, the foil packs quite visibly resealed — Mal shuddered to think what they might contain; ragged clothing with unimaginable stains, and piles of the flotsam and jetsam thrown off from the collision of many cultures.

"Nothing for you today, Mrrow. Looking for Tau the Silent. Seen him around the last few?"

Mrrow shook his head, his wide ears widening further and standing taller. "Not for few. What you want with skinny Human boy? Not even good for eating." Mrrow grinned, displaying a mouthful of sharp teeth, several of them berallyo-plated. A long pink tongue snaked out,

wiped the corner of one of the Bansnict's green eyes. "That boy trouble. Thief."

"And you're not?"

Mrrow's grin widened. "Merchant. Not same, most times." He gave the wiggle that, in his species, passed for a shrug. "Some times, anyway."

"Well, if you see Tau, telling him I'll buy him a meal at Dhamu's Place on LevSix."

"That place not good food, Mal! Wait." Mrrow reached into his shop — not difficult, as even his diminutive arm could reach almost to the back wall — and pulled out a selection of MRIs. "Here good food!"

"I don't think so, Mrrow." Mal shook his head, grinned to offset the insult to the Bansnict's wares, and strolled away.

Tau would get the message. Flaming Core, he'd probably beat Mal there.

* * * *

Unfortunately, Mal never expected to get caught up in a minor war on the way to Dhamu's.

He pressed his back hard against the cold rock wall of a minor side corridor on LevSix, his heart pounding, scrabbling almost unconsciously for the blaster strapped to his thigh.

Damn that boy, he cursed silently. Can't he just meet me at Dhamu's for a sandwich without starting some kinda bov-shit?

A wall of Connies stretched across the wider corridor a few meters in front of him. They were suited out in riot-control gear: heavy coveralls, thick with blaster-resistant cordon lining; nightsticks with leaded ends; and on hip or thigh, a blaster, ranging from light to heavy.

"Stay calm, citizens," shouted a heavyset woman with a surly expression and the eyes of a straz-head.

What the hell is going on?

"We're not here to interfere with your business," continued the woman, a sergeant by her insignia. "We just want to ask a few questions."

Sure. Just questions... just questions always went with not gear. Maybe it wasn't Tau who started this.

Malik began to edge quietly backwards, into a maintenance shaft that he could use to bypass the promenade and get to Dhamu's the back way. It was just a couple of corridors over; shit, he could almost smell the toubrew from here...

Across from Malik's position, two spacers came pounding down a corridor — and slammed into the line of Connies.

A Connie swatted his blaster across the face of one spacer, knocking her to the littered floor. Her companion — Malik could smell the fumes of liquor coming off her clear across the corridor — gave a yell and jumped the cop who'd hit her companion.

As if that had been a signal, all hell broke loose. Screams and shouts echoed as a barrage of objects — pipes, bottles, unidentifiable crap scooped up from the floor — rained down on the heads of the Connies.

"We're under attack!" shouted the Connie sergeant.

Good, Malik thought. They'll retreat, go get reinforcements, and by the time they get — "Return fire!"

Blaster fire laced out, catching a man standing a few meters from Malik full in the belly. The man's mouth opened in a blood-filled scream, and he fell to the floor, smoking bowels oozing out like lazy snakes to curl around his twitching torso. A woman, whose right leg had mutated into a charred stump below the knee, was dancing crazily on the other towards a side corridor.

Malik's blaster was in his hand, but he had no real target as smoke and fumes filled the promenade. No use. He had something else

more important to do, anyway; warn Dhamu and the others, make sure Tau had made it there okay, then get them all the hell further into the Depths until this bov-shit died down. With any luck, the Connies would bypass the corridor leading to the bar...

Malik raced to the back of the maintenance passage, kicked in an access panel, and with a grunt, squeezed his body into a tunnel half a size too small for him.

* * * *

No luck. No damn luck at all.

Connies surged out of the promenade, filling the corridor outside the door to Dhamu's bar, and Malik could see fighting going on inside.

How did they get here so damned quick? He peered down through a ceiling vent, coughing as the smoke and fumes were sucked past him by the huge vent fans. Below him spread a maelstrom of fear and confusion, as green blaster fire and red blasts from older models made crazy stained rainbows of the gray-blue smoke, and faces faded in and out of recognition as rickety circulation fans roared to keep up with the intensified flow of foul air. Screams and protests echoed up to his hidden post; he shook his head and began to wiggle slowly into a narrow passageway that led to Dhamu's storerooms.

"Hey, bov-brain! Over here! You looking for me?"

Damn, damn, damn! Tau's voice. That boy never knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Malik slithered back, cursing softly, and crouched over the vent, one hand poised to slam down across the mesh, the other with blaster ready. His brown eyes searched, searched through the confusion below, seeking the lanky figure of the Human boy.

"Yeah, you! You voids couldn't catch a rattru with a block of cheese and two dozen

feels!"

There he was! The black castoffs the boy wore faded in and out of focus in the smoke-filled gloom, but Malik could see where he was standing now.

"Can't find your own asses with all your hands and a metal detector—"

What the Core was the boy doing? Was he trying to get a face full of blaster?

Malik slammed his empty hand down on the wire mesh that covered the access panel, but the rusty screws held firm for a change. He slammed again, again, and they gave way; the mesh fell on the head of a Connie who had a blaster pointed at Tau. The blaster went off, wide, two meters away from the boy — and Tau turned and ran.

Thank the Core! At least he's got sense enough to—

Half a dozen Connies — apparently deciding that an unarmed boy's insults were a safer bet than scores of angry Deepers with contraband weapons and fists — took off after him.

Malik dropped from the ceiling, cursing fluently, started after them... and tripped over a body. Seconds later, what felt like a steel-toed boot connected firmly with the side of his head...

* * * *

A scream.

Malik was pretty sure it was his own.

He jerked up, sick, fighting dizziness, opened his eyes... and at once wished he'd managed to forgo that somewhat less than dubious pleasure.

He sat on an unyielding floor. The room that enclosed him couldn't be near an outer lev, judging from its shape: an opening carved from solid rock in a weird conglomerate of non-Euclidean angles, angles that hurt his eyes.

Something hurt his eyes, anyway... and his head and his chest and, in point of fact, all

the multitudes of him.

Somewhere in the Depths, natch, he thought hazily. Where else would I be?

He opened his mouth to complain about the sharp stone that jutted into his back... and watched with varying degrees of calmness as his tongue detached itself and rolled out of his mouth, to pool like a slimy snake in his lap.

Malik snapped his now empty mouth closed as the room shifted around him, the walls changing from grey-green-brown to blinding blue-white. He was no longer in a small unidentifiable corner of Omega Station, but onboard a ship — in the control room, no less, of the old End of Time. Before him stood Executive Officer Vezmir Zad in all his glory: beefy arms, stocky legs, a chest as broad as the buttocks of a Blender whore, and a face that would make a mother wimmerbat cry.

"Blayne!" roared Zad, his face turning an interesting shade of purple as he motioned towards Malik's feet. "What do you mean, coming to the con like that?"

Malik, interested, looked down — careful not to open his mouth and display his tongueless state. His feet, while bare, looked no different than normal; and he often manned the con partially dressed or even naked. After all, the Time wasn't a military ship; she was a pirate-rib.

Then he looked again. Yes, his feet were bare; unfortunately, they weren't in their normal position, attached to the bottoms of his legs. Instead they were wandering around loose, as if seeking their missing homes.

Malik could feel another scream building as he watched his feet scrabbling on the deck, which was no longer white but a pale, translucent gray; this new color lingered for a moment before turning black. He wondered what would happen if he opened his mouth to let the scream he was biting back escape, and he wondered too exactly where his tongue had disappeared to — was it

lying in wait somewhere, ready to pounce on his defenseless feet?

"Malik?" This voice didn't belong to Zad — and anyway, Malik recalled in sudden clarity, XO Vezmir Zad had died spectacularly and with a great many frozen plumes of blood, just after Maryn Meredi had him spaced out the airlock of the old Time.

So the voice didn't, couldn't, belong to Zad...

Then who?

"Malik?"

The voice didn't sound happy. Malik wondered if he should reach out in the darkness that now surrounded him, but was afraid he might lose more parts of himself.

"Here, drink this."

A glass, cold against his lips, poured a burning fluid down his throat. Malik coughed as liquid fire coursed through his body, jerking him unceremoniously back to full consciousness. He sat up, protesting weakly, "What the shit...?"

Crlia put one hand — her other one was wrapped in dingy bandages — on his chest and pushed him back down onto what was, he discovered by squinting through the gloom, the floor of Dhamu's bar. The burly, massive Modajai barkeep himself, his yellow eyes red-rimmed from the smoke that still filled the air, towered over them; dangling from one hand was an ancient Dondaro Mark Five blaster, huge, bulky and sintinz out of date.

How the hells does he even get charges for it, Malik wondered blearily. He blinked and shook his head. "What the...?"

"Yeah, yeah, we already heard that one," groused Crlia in her hoarse, I've-tried-to-breathe-vac-too-many-times voice. "Creative conversationalist you ain't, Malik."

Malik gave it another try, his mind as cloudy as the atmosphere. "Where did...?"

"By Bhagnor's scales, you was laying in the middle of a pile of bodies right outside my door." Dhamu shook his head, the light glinting

off the grey-green scales that covered it in thick layers. "Them damn Connies ran off and —"

"Tau!" Malik sat up in a blaze of sudden memory... then slumped forward as his head threatened to explode. He took deep breaths through his mouth, trying not to puke.

"Yes, I saw him run through here, right as that damn rot started outside," Dhamu nodded. "Didn't see what happened to him but the boy can take care of hisself, you know that, Malik. Hells, he's been running the tunnels all his life; ain't nobody knows the Depths like Tau."

"Yah, he does," Malik coughed, fairly sure he wasn't going to puke in his lap, but not willing to risk any credz on it. "But I gotta go check on him, make sure he's all right."

Malik struggled up, checked to see if his blaster was still in its holster, and tried to summon up his second best gnn for his two friends. From their expressions, the attempt was a dismal failure.

"I know some of Tau's secret cribs; he'll go to hole in one of them when he can.

Thanks for the rescue; I owe you both one."

"You and that boy," Crlia sighed as she sprang lithely to her feet. A pained expression crossed her face, only to disappear an instant later.

Mal spared a thought for her injured hand; how had she done it? She'd been fine last time he'd seen her. But he made no mention of the bandages; he knew Crlia too well for that.

"One a these days, Malik, one a these days, he's gonna land you in a pile of bov-shit up to your eyes..."

**Part Two:
INSIDE OUT, OUTSIDE IN**

Tau peered through dirty straggles of brown hair at the cell around him. His dark eyes gleamed in his ice-pale face, the right side of which was darkening to faint bluish-purples and reds. The cell wasn't the usual lowlev cave; instead it was sleek, smooth polybdalloy covering the bare rock of the Rock, glinting silvery-grey in the subdued light that trickled through the bars from the outer corridor. He reached out a curious finger and stroked the smoothness, so unlike the jagged surfaces he was used to in the Depths.

Tau had been in plenty of cells in plenty of lock-ups before, but never on LevTwo, never in anything this... was elegant the word? He'd have to ask Crila, or Mal. The RedPubs had got him more than once; the Inversodams at least a ten time, but this was the first time the Connies had got him; he hoped they wouldn't let it become a habit. Still, they'd been a sight more pleasant than the others; he was barely banged up at all, he thought, brushing a finger over his reddening cheek, though the sergeant who'd tossed him inside had all appearances of a strazzie.

Tau shrugged his shoulders inside the over-sized black cover-up that swamped him like a firebug inside a cargo bay; he'd slithered out of his battered boots and slid them under the cot that extended from the wall just after he'd been tossed inside the cell. Boots were valuable; he'd never dared take them off below LevFive, even in any of his most secret cribs. And clean water, just sitting there in the flusher, ready to drink; fresh from the recyke tanks, all clear and not smelling like garbage and filled with spores. He liked to paddle his bare feet in the flusher, and bend down to scoop up a drink, whenever any guards walked by. He loved their disgusted

reactions.

Funny. Connies were funny. Seven hells, anybody above LevFive was pretty damned funny, he thought. They threw away stuff that he and his tribe would have killed for... or would have, back when he had a tribe.

He reached inside his jacket and stroked the amulet that hung down on his scrawny chest. Bits of crystal, tiny bone fragments, segments of discarded polybdalloy and beralloy, all held together with mismatched wires twisted together; he knew it looked like trash to anyone else, but it was all he had left of his tribe. He remembered Vindi's clever hands when she'd made it... back before she'd been picked up and shipped off-Rock.

All his tribe had died or disappeared, one by one; some picked off by other tribes, many dying from bloody cough or soft bone, a few lost down unexpected shafts, two or three — the pretty ones — snatched and shipped off-Rock for slaves... until finally he was the only one left. He'd decided to die then and was on his way to the Beryl to offer it his life, when he'd stumbled into Crila and Malik Blayne. What in the Seven Hells they were doing there, so deep into the Depths, Tau had never asked. But they'd given him a new tribe and a reason to go on — even if he'd had to fight them both off for almost a year before he'd let them help him.

A rattle at the door to his cell.

"You, void."

Tau grinned at the guard on the other side of the bars. "Yah, you talking at me?"

"Who else, bov-brain?"

"Ah, tell it to the Core." Tau knew his grin was crooked — that bruised cheek hurt — but he had to keep up his well-deserved rep. Mal would be proud of him.

The guard ran her baton across the bars; beralloy meeting polybdalloy made quite

the impressive noise. It wasn't the same guard who'd grabbed him; maybe she'd come down from her straz high by now and was rolling and puking on the floor.

"Put your boots on, void." The corporal's broad face split into a sneer. "And wash your face; you're gonna talk to the captain."

* * * * *

Captain Carle Eversyn sat at his desk.

"Captain?" The liquid tones of his secretary Larata fluted over the comm.

Eversyn slapped down the reply button as if it'd just snapped at him. "Yes?"

"Doctor Kwarn would like to see you, sir. He's on his way from the phys-lab."

"Send him in as soon as he arrives."

Carle Eversyn leaned back in his chair, then sat up and shuffled through the pile of reports. An instant later, his door beeped and slid open, and Eversyn felt his heart go into hyperdrive.

Doctor Finias Kwarn walked in. Behind him, a skinny Human boy inside a cover-up five sizes too big for him stood grinning like a void, a burly Connie corporal just behind him, her hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Doctor. To what do I own the honor?" Eversyn snapped, settling back into his chair; it emitted a sibilant sigh as the internal nano-bots readjusted to the new body contours.

"I thought you needed to see the results of the tests on Sergeant Naro." Doctor Kwarn tossed a stack of comp-prints on the desk then took a chair without being asked; he'd never been one to respect authority, but it had never bothered Eversyn — until now. "She shows all the signs of being addicted to a powerful narco, something along the lines of zrendor or d'valtr — but stronger, much stronger."

"Where'd the sergeant get the drug? I was under the impression that the Consolidated Guard had control over all imports, legal or not."

"Ain't no import."

Eversyn sat up; amazement dropped his mouth open as his chair nano-bots whined in protest.

"Uh, captain; this boy was in lock-up. Sergeant Naro brought him in, after the... unfortunate incident on LevFive. We think he knows something about this drug."

"Well, boy?" Eversyn snapped.

The burly corporal dragged the boy forward by the collar of his cover-up; the stupid grin never left his face.

"This boy is from the Depths. What is he doing on LevTwo?"

"I think, captain, you'll want to hear this..."

* * * * *

"There," Cria nudged Malik. "See him? He tall enough?"

The woman's voice was a whisper just discernable above the soothing hum of the air-recycle system that murmured through the vent where they sat.

Malik Blayne peered through a crack, nodded down at the single Connie walking slowly up the corridor below them. Just the right size.

"Yah. He'll do."

"Take it slow, Mai. We don't want to end up in the cell next to Tau, do we?"

Her voice was just loud enough for him to hear over the buzz-hum of the fan and no louder; he wondered, and not for the first time, just how she did that.

"Oh, I don't know." Malik shrugged, taking a firmer grip on his blaster. "One way to get to him."

"Yah, if we wanted to get there in a neat little pile of pieces. You got a plan, or we just going to run in, blasters blazing? Cause if that's your idea, you've watched way too many vids, my dear boy."

"I'm not your dear boy, Cri, and I've always got a plan. Shh. Here he comes..."

The Connie, a tall lean male with a shaved head, stopped just below them. The cross-corridor was empty in both directions; nothing but pristine polybdalloy, broken here and there by portals and, just below Malik and Cri's hiding place, a two-meter square vid-screen set into the wall. Malik checked his chrono, then patted Cri on her back and nodded.

The screen, on either side of which they squatted, was already loose. Mal took a firm grip on it, his fingers spread through the mesh.

Below them, the Connie was staring at the vid-screen as a face slowly congealed out of silvery nothingness, like the very beginnings of the universe as it formed out of ions and gasses. A smooth, low, voice began:

Good cyk, sentients! Welcome to the tenth over news! But first, a word from our sponsor! Have you entered PNCNN's latest 'My Favorite Planet' contest? Just tell us, in twenty-five words or less, which planetary system you'd most like to visit. Winners receive a free dinner for two in Omega Station's most fabulous restaurant, and my own personal favorite, the Starview Lounge. Who knows? You might even be lucky enough to see me there! Prohibited where void; void where prohibited. And now, the news...

Just as the last word came from the vid-screens transmitters, Malik yanked up the mesh screen and dropped onto the enrapt Connie below; his booted feet landed squarely behind the man's shoulders and there was a satisfying thunk as a head hit the center of the vid-screen. The soldier crumpled to the floor.

"Very neat, Malik my son," Cri said as she dropped to the floor, her knees bending to absorb the shock. She flicked a strand of lavender hair out of her eyes and patted Malik on his back with her right hand — the flesh one.

She was keeping her left prosthetic hand carefully in her cover-up pocket; Mal didn't dare ask why. She'd only had it a few cyks and the sight of it still made him jumpy as fire-lice in a frying pan. "Never knew what hit him. Now what?"

"Now we strip him."

"Fun. Let me help. But we'd better drag him out of the corridor first, don't you think?"

A tall lanky Connie with white-streaked brown hair, his head sunk down into the collar of his grey uniform, stalked towards a door at the end of a corridor. As he moved, he read the sign on the door as it rotated through several spectra, thirteen languages and half a dozen glyphs:

*Consolidated Guard Headquarters,
Sector Three.*

Below the title, somewhat smaller languages/glyphs warned:

*Termination Possible for Those without
Legitimate Reasons for Visit.*

The man stopped before the door. One hand held a blaster; the other was entangled in the neck of a cover-up worn by a short, wiry woman with lavender hair. The woman was limping and a keening whine came from between her pale lips.

"Don't overdo, Cri," whispered the ersatz Connie as he tapped the toe plate with his recently acquired, Connie-issue boot.

There was a snkt as the door's internal sensors read the info from the boot-toe insert and recognized it with a cheerful, welcoming brpt.

"Heyo, let me have some fun, why don't you?" Cri Maragom grinned up at Malik

Blayne, then slumped into a frightened cringe as the door slid open before them.

Mal tightened his grip on Cri's cover-up and yanked her with him through the door. It shut behind them with a satisfied sigh; almost, Mal thought, as if it knew they were well and truly caught.

Mal shook off the image and strode towards a counter that bisected the small anteroom. The Connie corporal sitting behind the counter, broad shouldered and with a head like a cazandor melon, stopped tapping his keypad and looked up when they reached him. His broad jaw tightened in disgust and he snapped: "Your hair is not regulation length and you're—"

Cri reached out her prosthetic hand and stroked the corporal's cheek. His eyes rolled back into his head, a faint burning smell filled the room, and he crumpled across his desk. An immediate whine from the air filters, and the burning smell disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

"Shit, Cri. That new prosthesis... well, remind me not to piss you off. He dead?"

"Nah. But he'll have a pretty impressive headache when he wakes up; and he might not be as quick to notice stuff like haircuts... or, uh, eating and drinking and such." She sounded almost embarrassed as she carefully unscrewed a finger from her prosthetic hand and slid it into her left forearm through a small hatch near the elbow.

Mal grabbed the corporal and slid him off his chair, then — with some difficulty; damn, they fed those Connies good — parked him in a corner where he was hidden from anyone at the entrance or the single door that lead further into the Connie complex. Then he settled onto the hard chair and stroked the keypad.

On the long screen that made up the entire back of the counter, an apologetic yet dignified 'No Access' was his only reply.

"Damn!"

"Get out of my way, boy," Cri said,

shoving him over and settling her rounded butt on half the chair. "Let an expert show you how it's done."

Strokes, stabs, the occasional flick of a prosthetic digit, and Cri had the computer terminal eating out of her hand — quite literally, Mal thought with a chuckle. He'd often wondered where her information came from; this uncanny linking with the keypad told him a great deal about what he'd always suspected — Cri must be a hacker.

"Well, deus my machina, if we ain't the luckiest... Tau just had him a little visit with Captain Eversyn himself, and he's on his way back to his cell. Mal, my son, if we—" she gave a swift flick of a metal thumb and a map appeared on one side of the screen, with two tiny red lights proceeding down a green line that had to represent a corridor; the two red dots were approaching a yellow square, "—wait just outside that door, we'll have Tau in our hot little hands in just under, uh, seven minutes. Wait." Cri scrawled in her elbow hatch, slid a finger out and into its slot on her beralloy hand. "Now. Forewarned is forearmed... so to speak."

Mal groaned and checked his blaster.

* * * * *

Tau walked as slowly as he dared; the Connie corporal wasn't in a very good mood after their little visit to the captain's office and he didn't see any use in collecting more bruises. But he didn't have to trot, either; heyoo, there weren't no Confin after them. So he was careful to keep just a slight pull against her hand on his shoulder, and he looked all around as they walked. It paid to remember directions; nobody knew that better than him. Lots of times, he'd saved his tribe by remembering twists and turns in the Depths.

They turned a corner. Up ahead Tau

saw a tall Connie with a small Human female at his side. Funny. The woman had lavender hair... Tau slowed down even more as a pair of armed guards walked past and then disappeared into a door on the right side of the corridor.

"Come on, void," snarled his corporal, giving him a shake.

Tau glanced over his shoulder; nobody. He speeded up, almost pulling the corporal along until they were just opposite the pair he'd seen — and the corridor was empty in both directions...

* * * * *

Captain Carle Eversyn leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the burly corporal who had just lost an important witness. The corporal's eyes were fixed carefully on the wall above her captain's head, and her expression was noncommittal, though there was the faintest hint of anxiety about her mouth.

"So, Corporal," he said at last. "It seems that you have somehow managed to lose a very important suspect — to lose him, in fact, within the Consolidated Guard complex, with the highest security rating of anywhere in this triple-damned piece of shit. What exactly do you have to say for yourself?"

"Captain, I—"

Eversyn raised a peremptory hand. "I want an all-points on that boy. That was Malik Blayne on the sec-cams, or I'm a Bansnict. So." Eversyn shuffled a pile of papers, slid them into his top-sec slot, then hit the button to open his office door. "I think that's all for the moment, commander. I'll expect a report on my desk by in three hours. Dismissed."

"But... Sir—"

Eversyn looked up. "Dismissed, corporal," he repeated.

"Sir!" She snapped a sharp salute, spun on her heel and marched out the open door. It slid shut behind her.

To Captain Carle Eversyn, the silence in the room was deafening.

~ End ~

**Part Three:
OUT OF THE MOUTH OF THE BEAST**

It was between shifts in Dhamu's bar. In a place that had never known day or night, in a bar that never closed, it was almost impossible to find privacy and quiet. Almost, but not quite. The work shifts set up to keep the infrastructure of Omega Station ticking along, with some marginal degree of success, provided a certain ebb and flow of customers in all the establishments on the Rock, from the lush elegance of the Starview Lounge to the lesser known — to the up-dwellers, anyway — places like the Chow Now, the Eatz, or Dhamu's.

Malik stared out over his table, checking the clientele. Against the far wall — rough and carved from the Rock as were most places below LevThree — four L'Taltons perched on stools around a table, sipping the weak pale toubrew that Dhamu brewed in the back room and clucking softly to each other.

One, a neuter by the orange-gold color of its breast feathers, reached over from time to time and groomed its pair-mate's crest; one of the others — by their red-brown crest, those two were females — scurried in a flat bowl for bits of toasted toubfood and tossed them into the air for its pair-mate to catch in its beak.

Aside from the L'Talton pairs, the only other occupants of the bar Malik could see

were Criila and himself, and Dhamu behind the bar. He didn't count Tau the Silent, who, after polishing off three huge sandwiches and two glasses of beer, was stretched out on the padded bench beside him, snoring in quiet content. And Dhamu didn't look much more awake as he pushed a dirty rag in concentric spirals across the bar's stained polybdalloy.

Not that the burly Modajai ever looked more than marginally interested in what was going on around him; Kovindi fighters, even those who, like Dhamu, made it out alive and with enough money to find another profession, were seldom the same afterwards. Vicious fighting to the death could really take it out of even as tough a race at the Modajai.

"Cred for your thoughts, Mal my son?" Criila Maragom took a drink of beer and winced at the taste.

"They're not even worth half a micro, Cri. And if you'd rather have brandy or—"

"Nah, beer's good enough, even if I do know what Dhamu uses to make it. Brandy makes me chatty." She took another drink as if to prove her point; this time the wince was just visible. She tossed a forelock of lavender hair out of her eyes; they matched the lavender shade, though the blue-green streaks that ran through them, and her pale skin, showed she was part Human as well as having Halsan in the mix. What else was in her background, Mal wondered as he examined the small yet lusily figured woman who sat across from him. She was dressed in a brown spacer's cover-up open to show a halter, and boots that had seen better days. Except for the forelock, beaded with tiny bits of obsidian and garnet, that persisted in falling into her face, her hair was cropped short.

The right hand that held her beer glass was flesh; the other one was hidden beneath a glove, but Mal knew it wasn't meat. He'd seen the damage that hand, with its various prosthetics, could do. Recently, in fact; she'd wiped a Connie's mind blank and knocked him to

the floor with just a stroke of one finger. Not that her other hand was useless; he'd seen her bounce unruly spacers out of Dhamu's when she was working her shift. Cri liked a peaceful bar, and never minded cracking a few heads to get it.

"What makes you chatty, Mal?"

Malik looked into her eyes and felt a power that he could not explain. Those damn Oragens; what'd they and their crystal do to you, Cri?

"Saved my life is all. Why? Worried I'll walk around inside your head and find out some stuff you don't want me to know?"

Malik opened his mouth to reply — then realized he had not spoken aloud. "Hey; don't do that. It's as creepy as one of Tau's cribs down in the Depths. I always feel like something's watching me just out of sight. And since when did you get telepathic?"

"Since, oh, just lately, I guess. Or maybe I always been, and what the sisterhood did was just to show me how to tap it. But don't worry, Malik; I can't really see into that blocked off head of yours. I just pick up bits of flotsam, crap that floats around on the surface, like scum on top of sewage."

"Thanks — I think. That's a relief." Mal didn't know if he believed her, but didn't see what he could do about it if she was lying. He'd known Cri for, damn, it must be nearly eight sintinz. He trusted her... as much as he trusted anyone.

"Nah, you're not a trusting soul, are you, Mal?"

"Will you stop that?"

"Sorry, son. It's just that you're, uh, broadcasting pretty strong right now. Something is, you should pardon the expression, preying on your mind. Want to talk about it?"

"No. Yes."

"What I thought." Criila nodded.

"Whatever you tell me won't go out this hole,"

unless you give me leave. So talk. Get it off your mind."

Malik took a long drink of his toubrew, then set the glass down with precise care. He looked down at Tau, whose snores had gotten louder, and pulled his jacket further up over the boy's shoulders. A dirty toe peeked from the boot that just missed kicking him when Tau jerked in a dream.

A dream. Was it a good one? Could a boy like Tau, who'd lived in the Depths all his short life, have good dreams? A full belly and a safe crib; those were his ultimate in joy. Tau had been off to throw himself into the pits when Mal had found him; lost his family, then lost his tribe, the boy had said, and didn't want to live any more.

Malik knew what that was like; losing the only thing you had and not wanting to go on.

"So tell me about it."

Criila's voice was soft, soothing; no commands, no orders. Mal sighed, looked down at the table and saw his past in the interlocking rings of spilled beer.

He didn't think he'd be able to talk about it, but once he began, the words flowed out like the babblings of a strazzle.

"I was created in a lab, Cri. Can you imagine what that's like? To be grown like food or ka'frindi, on shit and chemicals? To know that you're nothing but an expendable piece of meat? I know. I knew from the beginning. They all made sure I knew..."

* * * * *

Docbre Xandrino stalked into the lab and I shuddered and hunkered down in my cage, just like all the rest of us test animals. Well, all but two of us. Number Three, in the cage next to me, just lay on his back in his own filth, moaning softly. He couldn't throw off the latest disease they'd given him; his skin was peeling off all over his body; bones were already showing through

the skin of his arms and legs, and his eyes were black pits, sunk back into his head. Three wouldn't last much longer, unless the Docbre decided to save him instead of watching the progress of the disease to the end.

Sometimes he did that; sometimes he brought us back. Two had been brought back a handful of times, but his mind wasn't there any more; he just drooled and snarled most of the time when I tried to talk to him, or whined as he licked his water bowl clean and thirsted for more. Four; well, Four had been gone for a while. The last we'd seen of him, he was strapped to a gurney and being rolled out the door. There were screams; we hoped they weren't his.

We were probably wrong.

So it was mostly One and me; I was Five. We were cloned from the same tissue, and we were test animals to see what the original tissue could stand; what pain, what disease, what damage we could live through, thrive through.

It hadn't always been that way for us. Once we'd had training; we'd lived in rooms and slept in beds, instead of on crumpled piles of fiber in polybdalloy cages. We'd been taught to read, so we could study the family our tissue had come from.

Family. That was the most alien concept, at least for me. One had understood it, or said he did; Two also, before his mind went. Three had tried to explain it to me; he'd always been quicker than the rest of us, before the diseases had eaten his brain away and left nothing behind.

Family. Related — that meant they shared DNA, of course; that much I could understand. After all, each of us had identical DNA strands; we'd been grown from the same tissue, in the same vat. That seemed normal, seemed to make sense.

But the part about living together,

sharing... love. Alien. Too alien for my mind to grasp.

But that was before Doctre Xandrino took over the labs. There had been a change in power, somewhere, somehow; we never found out what had happened. Just, one day, the Doctre arrived and took over. He wanted to see what we could stand, so he could inform the real one — the one with the family — what his body could take. That's what we were, he told us; spare parts for Rudof Dyll.

I didn't much like Rudof Dyll, even if he was me, or I was him. Why wasn't he in a cage, puking his life out or drooling, brainless and empty?

Doctre Xandrino paused before Three's cage and spoke softly into his portable comsys. I knew techie terms; I could read, and listen, and remember. I didn't know for how much longer, though; only One and I were still aware.

"Subject Three appears unable to withstand the ravages of the beldon-zeta bioengineered virus. It would be an interesting study to bio-link his brain with one of the other test subjects, to collect more precise data. Yes. Note that Subject..." I held my breath. "...One should undergo bio-link procedures in—" he paused, as if gauging how much longer Three might live,—"at over seven this cyk."

I looked up at the big chrono on the wall across from my cage. It was over four already. One didn't have much time left. Bio-links would kill one side of the link, if the other one died. And it didn't look like Three had much time left either. That would leave me, and Two. How long would it be before I was drooling and whining in my cage beside him, I wondered?

Not soon enough to suit me.

A warning klaxon brayed over the door leading from the lab. Doctre Xandrino dropped his comsys; I couldn't even hear the clatter it made as it hit the floor, not over the sound of the alarm. I watched as the Doctre strode towards the door; his lips were moving so I know

he was cursing, but no voice could compete with the klaxon.

The door burst open before the Doctre had taken more than five steps. A man, burly, bulky, zipped into an enviro-suit with the hood thrown back, stepped inside. He held up a hand; the other had a blaster in it, pointed squarely at the Doctre's chest.

The alarm cut off. Through the ringing in my ears, I heard Xandrino splutter: "What is the meaning of this? Guards! Guards!"

"Ain't no guards no more." The intruder grinned a silvery grin; he had more beralloy teeth than real ones. "Me and the voids has just took care of the guards. So calm down. Your little place has been took over. Now; what we got here?"

This wasn't asked of Xandrino, but of another envirosuit-clad figure who walked into the lab behind him. An arm reached up and pushed the hood back; a long nose wrinkled as the air from the lab hit it.

"Stinks in here, don't it?" asked the burly man. "Want I should just burn it all while we loot the rest of the 'ole?"

"It's a lab, Klurt. Lab-or-a-tor-y. There are probably valuable drugs in it." The newcomer was female, with short curling black hair that framed a brown face. "We are pirates, you know; when are you going to learn what pirates do? We steal anything of value, remember?"

"Hah. Joke. Then what, cap'n? Kill the lab boy here, toss the animals in the recycler, and see what we can find?"

"Better idea, Klurt. Good boy, you're learning. So go to it."

"I think you'd best get out of my lab," began Doctre Xandrino in a placating tone, since there didn't seem to be any guards. "I'm sure we can come to some agreement that will satisfy us all. Come out of this stink and into my office, and we'll—"

A broad beam of red-orange blaster

fire, and the Doctre fell to the floor, his head cut neatly from his body. The blast was so quick that I could see his eyes fluttering as his brain took the last few seconds of life to realize it was over.

"Kilurt. Sloppy. Now look at that mess."

The captain shook her head at Kilurt, her tone chiding. She stepped with care over the still twitching body. Kilurt kicked the head with one massive boot; it rolled under One's cage. One had caught the edges of the beam, I saw; he was lying still in the bottom of his cage, smoke rising from his chest.

"Zantz, what'd they do in here?" She was looking down at Three; he looked back up at her, but there was nothing left in his gaze but pain.

She raised her own blaster, somewhat smaller than Kilurt's; a pale yellow needle beam shot out and Three sighed as he died. A tiny red-rimmed hole leaked blood. Two whined and giggled, reached through bars and dabbed a finger in Three's blood, then licked it. Two was always thirsty.

The captain gave a disgusted sound and used the blaster's needle beam on him. Two grinned at her as he died.

Then she turned to me and raised her blaster.

"No... please."

My voice was rusty from disuse. But most of all, I was amazed to find out that I didn't want to die. Not want to die? It was all I had wanted for too long.

The burly pirate stomped over and stood beside his captain. He pointed his blaster at me.

"Shit, this one talks. I thought they was all just vat-born testers, spare parts. Want I should blast him?"

She looked down at me. I didn't recognize that look in her eyes; I didn't remember ever seeing it before. I learned — much, much later — that it was called pity.

I also learned how seldom the captain allowed herself to feel it.

She leaned closer to my cage; I watched

her long nose wrinkle in disgust and realized how filthy I was, how much I must stink. But the rest of them, even Doctre Xandrino; they were stinking even more right now.

I looked up, met green eyes. They were the last things I was ever going to see, I knew. I was glad they were so beautiful. I'd almost forgotten beautiful, in my time in the cage. Almost forgotten a lot of things.

"Do you have a name?" The captain's voice was strong, but not harsh.

"Fr—" A fit of coughing took me; the smell of burned flesh wafted past as it was sucked into the recyke-sys. I could taste the copper of blood in the back of my throat.

"Five."

If I'd ever had another name, and I was almost sure that I had, I couldn't remember it.

"Five." The captain stood straight; she was almost as tall as Kilurt. She looked around the lab. "Only three others in here. Shouldn't you be Four?"

"They took Four. He was strapped to a gurney. We never saw him again." I hadn't spoken so many words in a long, long time.

"So."

For a long moment, the captain just looked at me. I watched those eyes. I wanted them to be the last sight I'd ever see.

Then she holstered her blaster. "Kilurt, get the rest of the crew busy stripping this place. I want everything of value stowed away in Hold Seven so we can get off this planet. They must have auxiliary guards somewhere in orbit; we need to be loaded and gone before they arrive."

Kilurt gave a sloppy sort of salute and turned to go.

"And Kilurt? Send Quarneon in here."

"What you want with the medic, cap'n? You hurt?"

"No. But our newest crewmember needs some attention. Now go."

* * * * *

Criila reached over and patted his hand. "I think I like your pirate captain, Mal. What was her name?"

"Maryn Meredi." He'd said it. He hadn't been able to say it for so long that the relief was overwhelming. "She had her medic fix me up, then put me in a stasis tube. Next thing I knew, I was all well."

"Where's Captain Meredi now?"

Malik turned up his glass, swallowed five times, and set it down empty. He looked at his friend, who smiled back at him, pity in her eyes. He recognized it this time.

"Dead. Maryn's dead, Cri."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mal. What happened?"

"I killed her."

~ End ~

Part Four: MASTRIZ MEREDI REGRETS

The shuttle had finally reached the docking airlock; she could hear the series of snaps and pops and clangs as they echoed throughout the craft. There was the usual flurry of announcements and the shuffling of feet, tendrils and various other appendages as the passengers got ready to disembark.

A willowy Narinz handed out information vids and repeated warnings in a burbling voice:

"Remember, visitors! Omega Station is currently under the control of the Consolidated Guard. Please keep your ID-badges in full view at

all times. Have a pleasant stay, and it is strongly advised that you never go below LevTwo without proper authorization and hired bodyguards. Boomboom's Rent-a-Guard is a most reputable firm; so is Gweedo's Strongarms. Visit their kiosks in Alpha Corridor."

Maryn Meredi, ignoring the hubbub that murmured and whispered and trilled about her, stretched her long legs forward, kicked the seatback in front of her, then leaned back.

The Sloygat that had perched in front of her for the last ower, with few apparent signs of life, now turned its stick-like upper torso and glared over the back of its seat.

Five eyes can produce a lot of glare, she thought in amusement as she grinned back at the 'Gat.

"It is of the rudeness utmost to extend lower appendages and disturb this one," it said, in a clipped and precise accent. It was showing off — many 'Gats were linguists — and its voice was pitched so high as to make visible shivers run down the back of a portly Bansnit that sat across the aisle.

"Sorry," Maryn pulled her legs back, on the way kicking the 'Gat's seat again just for fun. It gave an irritated whine that faded away into supersonics. The Bansnit growled in agony and its long tongue shot out to lick an ear.

Maryn slid down further in her seat and propped both booted feet on the back of the 'Gat's seat.

LevOne. She hadn't been on LevOne since... how many visits to the Rock ago? She hadn't been to Omega Station for... well, way too long. The Rock was so much more than these voids and offal around her would ever know. But still. It was going to be... interesting to visit with some credz in her pockets for a change, after all the times she'd hit the Depths running, with little more than a Mark Five at her hip, a list of people to rob, and a

deadline.

Too bad Mai couldn't be with her. Those had been some times.

Yah. Times when we'd almost get killed from one cyk to the next. Don't miss 'em. Better now.

But she wasn't so sure it was. Life could get pretty boring when nobody was trying to murder you. And being alone wasn't as much fun as she'd thought it would be. Sometimes she missed the rough and tumble of the old End of Time; the crew hot-racking, sharing sleep pods, half on duty while the other half slept as they raced from one score to the next, with shore leave a distant dream.

Yah. Those were some times.

Too bad every last one of her old crewmembers was dead.

Piracy could be a dangerous way to make a living.

* * * * *

Maryn drifted through the lines at the reception pod with a handful of credz prominently displayed in one hand. Her expression was a careful blank, as if she had no suspicion that the credz were there, nor that the wad decreased in size with each step she took.

A tribe of youngling Bansnicks clustered around her at one point, tiny hands reaching smoothly for her pockets. She snapped at them in their own language, calling them 'offspring of toothless z'darrownnn', and they recognized one in their own vocation, gave up on her and headed for a more likely target — a fat Human female with two husky attendants who looked to be all gonads and no brains.

At the end of the final line — most of the passengers who'd ridden down with her were still stumbling through their ret-xams — she lost the last of the wad to a Connie with a small head and a large blaster. He handed her the single case that he'd just that minute closed.

"Welcome to Omega Station, Mastriz," he said, offering her a stiff bow that showed how unaccustomed he was to any sort of formal courtesy. She grinned at him, remembered how rich she was and changed the grin to a sneer, then wandered through the last set of doors in the containment corridor into Dome Seven proper.

Another corridor. Around her, species from all segments of the galaxy — those who were O-2-breathers, anyway — swarmed past, coming and going in every direction. And the throng wasn't limited to O-2-Bs, either, she saw; a pair of methane-breathing Szigtizes rolled past, both in the latest style enviro-suits; Protectaire brand, no less.

Szigtiz with credz. What a concept.

But unlike inside the reception pod, with its utilitarian off-white walls in smooth polybdalloy, this corridor was a vibrant kaleidoscope of colors running off in both directions, blending and changing and morphing without stop. The shifting images were dizzying, forcing the eye away from them and towards the opening across the corridor.

"Blazing Core," Maryn whispered, then grinned at the Rock oath coming back to her so aptly. She stepped over to the window, gazed up, up, past buildings and restaurants and domiciles and pod-clusters, to the top of the semi-transparent dome almost half a klick above her head. On the other side of the dome, ice crystal stars clustered in swirls deep inside the galaxy, or danced alone on its edges.

"Hard to believe all of this sits on top of nothing but piles and piles and piles of—"

"Welcome, welcome!" The soft, seductive voice came from a vid-screen that took up several square meters on the corridor wall just beside the window. A purple-skinned female, all gleaming smile and enhanced mammanies, continued, "I'm Shareen and I'd

like to extend my personal welcome to Omega Station! Nothing like it exists in the rest of the galaxy. Welcome! We're so glad you're here!"

"Yah. I'm sure everyone here will be just delighted to see — my credz." Despite speaking in little more than a whisper, Maryn saw that several passers-by had caught her words. One, a male Nannz with aqua-and-black bandings, allowed a small grin to illuminate his flat face before he offered her his throat in submission stance. A janipod and squeegee clanked in one web-fingered hand as he disappeared down a ramp a heartbeat later.

Narinzs seldom hung around after exposing their throats for cutting; kinda took some of the sincerity away from the offer, Maryn had always thought.

The caster on vid-screen was listing points of interest. "Visit the stunning Starview Lounge, where all tastes are catered to and all species welcome. Drop into the shops that line Dome Seven's Alpha Corridor, and buy the most elegant wares available in this arm of the spiral. Stay at PodRoyale, the most luxurious pod-cluster on Omega Station, for a year or your expected life span, and rejuvenate all your senses after your journey. Buy..."

"Yah, yah. Buy, spend, buy, spend. Zantz. Like I got nothing better to do."

She shifted her case to her other hand, comforted by its weight. She wasn't on the Rock for fun. She was there to find a man, kill him, and leave.

Simple. Quick and easy. At least, she hoped so.

Although there was certainly no reason why she couldn't enjoy herself in the process. Mai would have wanted her to have some fun... even while she was offing his genetic double.

That was all she needed to do; then she would be all caught up, all debts paid. She could shake the Rock dust off her feet and blast for a place with air and a sky. Maybe settle down; get some rest; count her money. Take it easy.

Without knowing it, Maryn sighed at the dismal prospect.

Then she shook off the almost unconscious images and headed down the corridor.

Had to find a place to crash for a few cyks. And the booming voice had recommended the Royale...

The PodRoyale wasn't just the best podcluster on the Rock; it had to be the best in this arm of the galaxy. And when she'd passed her right wrist, with its subcutaneous cred-chip, over the viewer, the desk clerk had metaphorically dropped to his knees and kissed her boots — would have in actuality, no doubt, except Rentoveens didn't have knees.

Instead his long neck curled into a loop and all four of his eyes blinked in rapid succession.

Two bell-Narinzs fought over her case; the one that lost motioned her to the drop and they both ushered her into a suite that cost, per cyk, more than she's once spent on a crate of Mark Sevens, with charges. Maryn dismissed the Narinzs, both happy with their handful of credz, set the door lock, and wandered around the pod. Zantz, it was bigger than Hold Nine on the old Time. She cast an eye over the pod-service holoscreen that took up a large chunk of one wall; whatever she had a taste for, in food or drink or other pleasures, was listed, in seventeen gaudy colors and blaring opti-sound... plus quite a few things she had no taste for at all, and was pretty sure she never would.

She waved a hand over the controls, and the screen blanked. The sudden silence beat loud against her ears. She sighed, caught herself doing it, and snorted.

"I sound just like Mai did when he remembered his time in the cage."

She grabbed her case and tossed it on the sleeping platform. A snick of the lock — a very simple, innocent, easy to pick lock — and

it fell open. A few personal items, tunics, a robe — the case of a woman who was on the Rock to do some serious shopping.

Maryn dumped everything onto the plat and manipulated the hidden compartments in the oddly thick walls and bottom of the case. In a few minutes, she had assembled a tiny Zintero blaster, no bigger than a Bansnict's ethics; it had a clip that she could attach to her hair, though she'd had to let it grow out for that very purpose.

Irritating. She liked to keep her hair short. But she didn't have to worry about firelice or podbugs, not in the Royale.

And it wouldn't be for very much longer anyway.

Now. She was ready.

She strode to the opposite wall, and activated the window controls. The cloudy gray faded to sharp transparency, and she gazed out over a large chunk of Dome Seven, spread out before her like the holoscreen goodies she'd just dismissed.

Across a wide cluttered expanse of shops and corridors and open esplanades, almost directly in front of her window, sat the iridescent dome that was the Starview Lounge.

Maryn grinned the grin of a predator. If any of her unfortunately deceased former crewmates had seen that grin, they would have recognized it.

Guess it was just about time for supper.

* * * * *

Malik Blayne huddled down, making himself as small as he could in the hollowed out opening too small to be called a cave. His knees hurt as they dug into the rock beneath him, and his shoulders ached as he tried to hunch them down even more. Beside him, Tau — apparently boneless — perched on his heels, comfortable and at ease. The boy's eyes glinted in the muted light as he peered through brown, dirty tangles

of hair into the larger cave beyond.

"How much longer?" Mal hissed. The hiss turned to a faint gasp of pain as his arm jerked spasmodically and banged an elbow against a jagged crystal that stuck out of the rock at his side.

"Long as it takes," the boy replied, and gave a fluid shrug that just rippled his twenty-times-handed-down cover-up.

He's enjoying this. Blazing Core, wait'll I get him back up-lev. I'll... I'll... what the shit?

A single — word? — spoken as loud as a shuttle engine revving for liftoff. It tore through the cave, reverberating into endless echoes that piled atop each other like a wall of sound.

Malik saw Tau tense. They both hunkered down further.

Don't know what that was... don't know if I want to know what that was... but if I have to do this much longer, I don't know if I can stand it. Too much like being... in a cage. He took slow, long breaths, his eyes focused on the floor beneath him. A layer of grey sand. A single firebug trundling across the uneven rock, jaunty antennae waving; it marched into a crack and disappeared.

Another... word?... softer this time; just loud enough to send the pale sand nuggets pirouetting across the darker rock surface. They danced for an instant then collapsed in a pattern of swirls.

A third sound — they must be words — but spoken from what vast mouth?

Tau gave Malik a comforting pat, nodded towards the opening of their makeshift hiding place, and disappeared through it in a smooth and almost soundless slither of arms and legs.

Malik followed, cursing silently as joints popped and tiny pains cut into stiff muscles like shards of glass.

It was such a relief to stand up straight — out of the cage at last — that for a moment

Mal reveled in the feeling. Then he saw what was spread before them, on the shores of a dead and deadly sea, and his breath stopped in his throat.

Row after row after serried row of small figures, barely taller than a youngling Bansniet, clustered on the grey sands. Their masses reached as far as Malik could see in the dim light — he made a mental note to never visit again without his lumilenz — and stretched from the very edge of the poisoned sea into the dim distance, and he had no doubt far, far beyond.

An expectant hush filled the huge cavern. Even the silent, tideless sea seemed to stop its restless motion and grow still, as if holding its breath in anticipation.

Then Tau grabbed his sleeve and tugged. Mal followed the boy down a rocky slope and ever closer to the silent, motionless beings. The grates of the Humans' booted feet on rock and sand sounded like a sacrilege, an intrusion on an almost holy moment, but none of the figures made the slightest sound; no fur-covered head turned, no yellow eye flicked sideways.

They reached the first of the ranks, and Malik at last could see what the beings were. Uffas, the wedge-tailed amphibians that swarmed in the deep lakes. How did they get here, on the shores of this lifeless sea, a sea cut off from all the other subterranean bodies of water on the Rock?

The small Uffas opened a pathway for them, a path that closed behind in eerie silence. Tau stopped a meter from the waterline, and Mal stumbled into place beside him. They turned to face the amphibian ranks.

As if it had been one single appendage instead of thousands, the right arm of all the creatures rose, in astonishing unison. A heartbeat later, the left followed. Mouths opened — Malik could see those closest to him, round holes that housed tiny forked tongues and row after row of blunt teeth — and again, a single word poured out in a single sound, as if uttered by a single mouth.

Again, the word, in a shout that loosed small rock fragments from the invisible ceiling far above. One hit Mal on the top of his head. Malik could feel the blood rising in his face.

"This is embarrassing, Tau. How much longer?"

"You saved their leader, their king, when you sent the medz. They want to give you thanks. This is their way." Tau grinned, his white teeth bright in the gloom.

"Yah. Blazing Core, I just shipped in some supplies; it was no big. They didn't have to go to this much trouble."

"The Uffa are an honorable race. They return thanks where it is due. Enjoy. How often does someone tell you thanks?"

The boy had a point.

Malik sighed and plastered a grin on his face. He nodded in what he hoped was an appreciative way, instead of one embarrassed to the Core.

Good thing Crla wasn't there. She'd never let him live this down.

"All right. But I can't say long. Got a meeting set up."

"Won't take much longer. Just look like you enjoy the attention."

Attention: that was the last thing Malik enjoyed.

Now his alter ego, on the other hand...

* * * * *

Malik stepped out of the huge shower pod in his private quarters of the Dyl Dome. He'd had to take three separate showers, with different soaps for each. The dead sea sent out dangerous poison fumes; that was taken care of by the first soap. The Uffas smelled like rotten fish; the second soap took care of that little problem. The third one deposited time-release scents on his skin. Rudof Dyl always reeked of perfume.

He glanced up at the iridium-plated

chrono on the wall.

Late. He was going to be late.

Good. Everyone expected Rudof to be late. Rich citizens had their own schedules, and those who served rich people set their chronos to match.

Malik cursed under his breath as one of his jeweled eyelashes stuck to a finger. He got them all on at last, and slid into tight orange breeches and green shirt with ruffled breast and sleeves. He yanked his hair, now a brassy yellow, behind his head and jabbed a ruby-studded comb into it.

Had to remember to get some more red dye.

Malik stared into the mirror.

Rudof Dyll grinned back at him.

"Time for supper. And I'm starved."

* * * * *

The Starview Lounge. It was huge, gaudy, pretentious, loud, overpriced and full of an assortment of richer-than-they-should-be Rock denizens, all having a core of a good time. Maryn loved it.

She'd reserved a table on one of the floating disks. Wasn't sure now that it had been the best idea. The preprogrammed 'random' patterns kept the disks — there were only seven that she'd seen — fairly far away from each other.

Not the best situation, if Dyll occupied a floater too. But if he was at a ground-level table, that would work. She'd already mapped out the disks' orbits; each drifted over the lower fixed tables in set patterns and within easy jump range of the floor.

And occasionally, she was glad to note, of each other.

But she hadn't seen Dyll yet. No problem about recognizing him, natch. He was Mal's genetic double, but she was certain he wouldn't dress like Mal, in handed-down cover-ups and

battered boots. Not a man as rich as Rudof Dyll was. He'd no doubt be the gaudiest one in the entire Starview, not even excluding the pride of Galavanz that occupied a table in one corner; their iridescent shells glowed in ever-changing rainbow hues.

The thought of Dyll made her reach up to pat her elaborate hairstyle, a gravity-defying upsweep miraculously created by one of the Narinz dressers at the PodRoyale. When a single finger touched the tiny Zintero, Maryn smiled. She reached out a hand and activated the holoscreen. A drink; she could use a drink. Hmm... Adarian nectar. Just the thing.

She punched in the order and settled back in her chair. She looked relaxed, a bit bored. When any of her old crew had seen her look that way, they'd check their blaster charges and strap into safety harnesses. But the Human waitperson who floated up on an agrapad showed no concern when she delivered the drink. Just a rich woman enjoying a drink at the Starview.

Time, as is its wont, passed. Maryn watched the dancers in their groups of two, three and more move to the soothing sounds of somasar music, while her mind mapped and plotted each disk's precise trajectory and route. Her own disk was one of the smallest, seating only two at its onboard table. Most of the others were filled with diners.

All but one, indeed. It was the largest, and flew the highest, and had the most elaborate pattern.

And it was set for two, though the table was big enough to hold many more. Maryn had learned — and had paid good credz for that little bit of information — that Rudof Dyll was never seen without his Vamir bodyguard. There were other Vamir about the place, but save for a pair on the dance floor, the others appeared to be simply employees.

Maryn yawned in boredom. If he didn't show this cyk, it made little difference. She'd

keep coming until he did.

Then her mouth snapped shut as she swallowed the last of the yawn. The largest disk had paused at the highest of the three mezzanine balconies and two figures were taking their seats. She couldn't be sure, from this distance, that one of them was Dyll — he was humanoid, at least — but the other was certainly a Vamir, four armed and covered in brown fur. She couldn't make out its clan stripes, but she knew that Dyll's own particular Vamir was of Clan Snrl'Pau.

She watched as the disk hovered, waiting to enter the pattern. While it waited, Maryn checked back through the disks' routes, trajectories and relative speeds, all stored in her head. Sintinz of navigating through the galaxy, often without the benefit of nav-comp or nav-bot, had made her almost as fast at calculating, and easily as accurate, as any machine.

She would reach within leaping distance of the disk — the disk that was at this instant entering the flight pattern — in fifteen-point-seven minutes. Three-point-six minutes afterwards, the disk would be skimming over the dancers' heads.

Maryn dragged her eyes away from Dyll — she hoped it was Dyll — and the Vamir. She could feel her heart speed up. At last. The final debt paid, the slate wiped clean.

Only a few more minutes...

She shouldn't, mustn't stare. She settled back into her chair, heard the nanobots whine as they matched it to her mass and form.

Plans marched through her mind. Point-four minutes to make sure Dyll was dead. Three-point-two minutes after she blasted him, she'd drop to the dance floor, head for the kitchens.

Her route was mapped out; a new subcutie already under the skin of her left wrist, so credits were no problem.

Calm. Stay calm.

Think of something else.

Memories... the first time she'd seen Malik,

squatting naked in a cage... he'd looked up at her, brown eyes into green, and asked her not to kill him. She hadn't had to think twice; she knew he'd be useful to her, even before she knew who he was.

Useful. Yah, like a 'virosuit was useful in high vac. He'd made XO in less than a year, right after she'd had to space Vezmir Zad's fat ass for stealing. Pirates stole for a living, but the code was clear; you didn't steal from shipmates. Mal had been her right hand for three sintinz. She'd held him in her arms a hundred times after one of his dreams of being back in the cage.

And when they'd lost that final battle and watched the End of Time blow... when they ended up in the bohraalnite mines on the prison planet of Golgarro... when they'd plotted the mass escape that had gone so terribly, horribly wrong... she'd known then that whatever Mal asked of her, Maryn would do.

Well. Mal had never had the chance to ask her to do anything. But this was something she was going to do for him on her own. She was going to kill that fool Rudof Dyll, and enjoy doing it.

And if she didn't manage to escape? The way Maryn saw it, it didn't much matter. Not any more.

Not with Malik dead. Not with all her crew dead in the escape attempt from the mines.

Didn't much matter.

The disk was close enough now for Maryn to be sure. That foppish dandy had to be Dyll. Besides, under the makeup and jewels and fancy clothes, he looked enough like Mal to be his brother. Zantz, why not? After all, they were clones.

Maryn watched as the disk drifted closer. She followed it, her eyes tracking the trajectory. No use not watching now; it was Rudof Dyll, the richest man on the Rock.

Everyone else in the room watched too.

The chrono in her head sent adrenaline rushing through her veins. Just a few more minutes...

Maryn drew her legs back, sat up straight, pushed her chair back. She turned sideways, bent over as if looking at the dancers below.

The Dyll disk was two meters away. Maryn gathered her long legs under her, leaped, her chair not even disturbed. She landed easily half a meter from the edge of the Dyll disk's table. It was larger than hers had been, but there were only two chairs, opposite from where she'd landed.

The Vamir — a tiny segment of her brain noted that yes, it was a male of Clan Snri'Pau — snarled out a deep-voiced Throob! but she ignored the threat. The Zintero was in her hand, the tiny but deadly muzzle trained on the ruffles over Rudof Dyll's heart.

For half a heartbeat, green eyes stared into — green eyes. Dyll's eyes widened so far that one lens popped out, the true brown exposed. Light sparked on his jeweled lashes as his mouth opened in an incredulous — smile?

Maryn tightened her finger on the triggerpoint... just as Dyll raised his hands and she saw the manacle scars that encircled his wrists.

The same scars she'd seen so many times on Malik Blayne.

She tried to stop the reflex of her hand, tried to keep from pressing the triggerpoint, but it was too late.

Too late.

Too late.

The words beat in her head as the blaster's minute powerplant shot out a jagged beam of energy, enough to blow a gaping hole in anything made of flesh and blood...

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~ Not the End ~

THE SPACE-HAWK SQUADRON BASICS by Wayne Skiver

In The Far Future when man is well established among the stars a special intergalactic police force arises out of dire need.

Brave men and women of various worlds and species are mysteriously "chosen" for an elite cadre and given the means to defend the weak and bring justice where needed in the known galaxies. Neuro-bonded, indestructible battle suits adorned with wings which can propel them at speeds faster than many spacecraft as well as tap into hidden spectrums of cosmic energy.

Due to the appearance of the uniforms they wear, they are quickly dubbed "Space-Hawks" by the general public. The source of their powers and of their leaders who choose them is a closely guarded secret.

The Space-Hawks number roughly 100 members comprised of humanoids and aliens. Each has the same abilities battle suit wise but may have other abilities natural to their race.

HQ: "The Aerie" is located on Calbos, a mountainous planet which is purported to be possibly the oldest planet to have developed sentient beings in the known universe. The Members of the squadron receive training and instructions from an unseen master there. (In fact the planet itself is sentient and grants a portion of its essence to the creation of the battle suits. Hence it would take something able to destroy a planet to destroy a suit.)

Powers and Abilities: The suits grant their owners slightly increased strength, flight, the ability to survive in the void of space as well as to enter/exit atmospheres, highly enhanced vision, and the ability to tap into a specific spectrum of cosmic energy to create either a

shield or an energy blast. They also grant telepathic communication with any other member of the squadron, regardless of location, and the Aerie. It also translates alien languages both written and spoken. The Hawks can, if desired, assume an appearance without the suit, allowing it to form an illusion of normal clothing.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Kane Gardner: (Human Male): Captain of the Hawk's descended from the people of Earth. Brilliant tactician and tough fighter. Very fond and proficient in both ancient human and alien martial arts.

Bx'ZrzL XL' Wxz aka "Zip": (Diminutive insectoid from the planet BzXz): "Zip" is exactly 12 inches tall and is of a race evolved from intelligent insects. He is green in color and has four arms and barbed legs. His species has the natural ability to "spit" a corrosive liquid from venom sacks within their mouth which only seems to affect inorganic matter.

Teravia Vox: (Female Humanoid): Teravia is from the planet Axos. The people of Axos resemble humans in every way physically except that their skin is one of two colors: a metallic gold or silver. Teravia is a Gold Axon. Her people also have a variety of psionic abilities though most choose not to develop them beyond simple telepathy. Hence when she speaks her mouth does not open. The limits and potential of developing her mental abilities are unknown though in times of great stress they could manifest involuntarily. She is the lover of Kane Gardner

Shriel: (Avian native of Calbos): Very few of the true Hawk-Men of Calbos take up the mantle of the warrior. Most, surprisingly

to other lifeforms, are scholars. Shriel is a Hawk-Like humanoid whose own wings are jacketed within those of the battle suit. He is a proud and fierce warrior, savage and lethal in combat and extremely arrogant at times. Though loyal to his friends he considers himself a "trueblood Space-Hawk". He is an expert with and carries an ancient Calbosian Spear. Very ornate. The Hawk-Men of Calbos can emit a piercing scream which in ancient times they used to stun smaller prey and disorient them. It is just as effective against Space Pirates and criminals.

Make up other aliens as you go! For very long trips the Hawk's do have cloak-capable cruiser star craft as well. Think *Lensmen* meet *Green Lantern Corps* and that's the feel I was going for with these guys...

Wayne

Space Hawk



Character Sketch by Keith Howell

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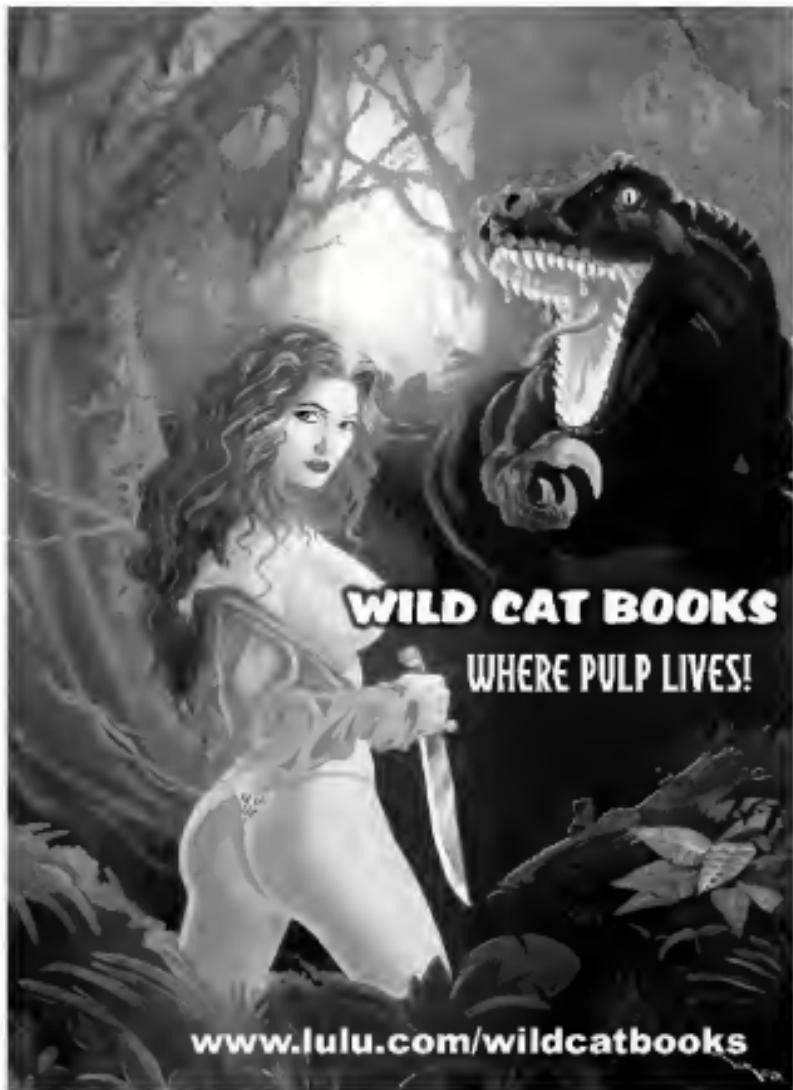
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